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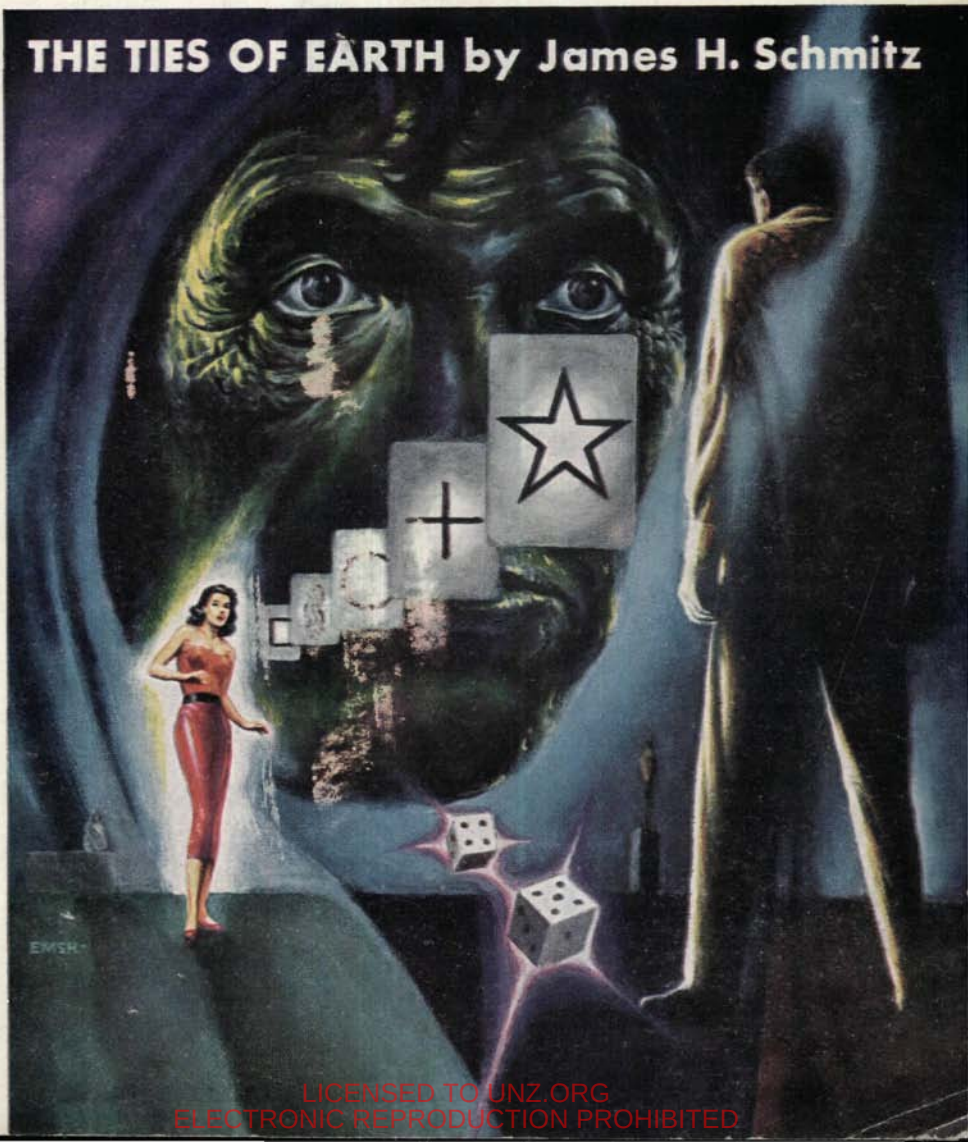

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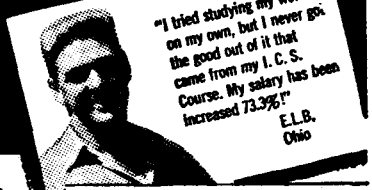

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NOVEMBER, 1955 VOL. 11, NO. 2

Galaxy

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WHO'LL BE AROUND?

THE question of racial survival is understandably on people's minds. However, before the alphabet-bombs made it a more immediate problem, researchers were wondering whether we'd do as well as the dinosaurs, who earned a handsome living for over 100,000,000 years — and don't think they were in a low-rental area either.

We've been around less than 1,000,000 years and yet, these researchers have long been asking, how soon will Man be replaced . . . and by what?

In the *Scientific American Reader* (Simon & Schuster), a typical article, called "Is Man Here to Stay?" by Loren C. Eiseley, gives all the facts except the one I think is crucial and so cannot draw the most probable conclusion.

Dr. Eiseley offers a valid and yet misleading conflict: "There is a widespread tendency to conceive of the course of evolution as an undeviating upward march from the level of very simple organisms to much more complex ones . . . the confusion lies in the fact that we fail to distinguish adequately between progressive evolution in a single family line and those greater movements which adjust life to the rise and fall of continents or the chill winds of geological climate."

Versus: "Yet as one compares the durability of the simpler creatures with that of the more efficient, one may be led to comment cynically that to evolve is to perish . . . obviously the completely inadaptive organism cannot master a shifting environment. Life must evolve to live. Why, then, are we confronted with the paradox that he who evolves perishes? Are we not the highest animal? And what, among all things that fly or creep or crawl, is more likely to inherit the future than we are?"

Dr. Eiseley then quotes "the law of the unspecialized," a contribution of Edward Drinker Cope, the great 19th century Quaker naturalist:

"The highly developed, or specialized types of one geological period have not been the parents of the types of succeeding periods but . . . the descent has been derived from the less spe-

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cialized of preceding ages."

If there's any confusion about the term "unspecialized," George Gaylord Simpson's *The Meaning of Evolution* explains: "It has been suggested that all animals are now specialized and that the generalized forms on which major evolutionary developments depend are now absent. In fact all animals have been more or less specialized, and a really generalized living form is merely a myth. It happens that there are still in existence some of the less specialized — that is, less narrowly adapted and more adaptable — forms from which radiations have occurred and could, as far as we can see, occur again. Opossums are not notably more specialized now than in the Cretaceous and could almost certainly radiate again markedly."

Why do very specialized forms become extinct? When catastrophe of one sort or another strikes, the form can't adapt to the changed environment. Dr. Eiseley's example is the anteater that starves when ants grow scarce, even though there is an abundance of food for less specialized animals.

Three more quotations and I'll get to my own point. Darwin predicted: "We may look with some confidence to a future of great length . . . All corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress toward perfection." But that follows right after this: "Of the species now living very few will transmit progeny of any kind to a far distant future."

Can these two statements be accepted simultaneously? It isn't easy, but I believe they can. Dr. Eiseley asks: "Is Man a specialized or a generalized creature?" The answer, it seems to me, is a contradictory yes — he's both.

The true divisions of mankind are not racial, national or religious. They're the aptitude groups. The most extreme specializations appear to be the idiot savants, who can't feed or clothe themselves, but can do *one thing* supremely well. If they are the end-product of our present trends, it's not hard to imagine them becoming extinct through inability to adapt to some drastic change.

Is that good-by to Man? No, for there is the more generalized bulk of the species, far outnumbering the increasingly narrowly specialized, and very well able to adapt to perhaps any change short of complete racial destruction.

And, I suppose, capable of radiating into forms we can't even imagine now, if the last part of Darwin's prediction is to come true.

Is this what he meant? I wish he had given us a bit of a clue.

—H. L. GOLD

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The Ties of

What was happening to Commager did worse than make no sense — it made too much sense — but which was true and which was not?

PART 1 OF A 2-PART SERIAL

THE HAWKES residence lay in a back area of Beverly Hills, south of Wilshire and west of La Brea. It was a big house for that neighborhood, a corner house set back from the street on both sides and screened by trellises, walls and the flanks of a large garage.

"That's the number," Jean Bohart said, "but don't stop. Drive on at least a block. . ."

Alan Commager pointed out that there was parking space right in front of the house.

"I know," Jean agreed nervously, "but if we park there, somebody inside the house would no-

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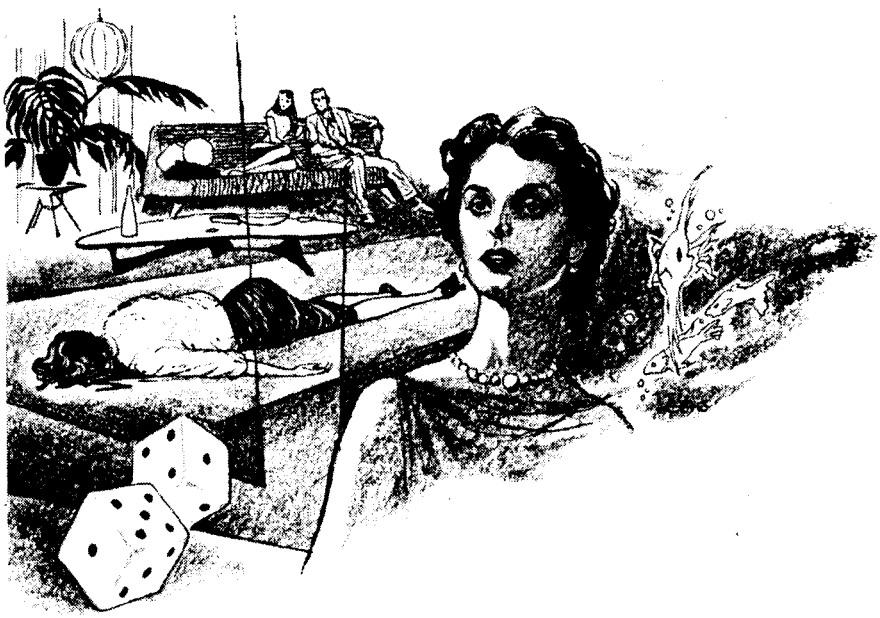
Earth

By JAMES H. SCHMITZ



Illustrated by EMSH

tice us and that would spoil the main purpose of our trip."

"You mean," said Commager as he drove on obediently, "they'll fold the black altar out of sight, drop the remains of the sacrificed virgin through a trap door and hose out the blood, while we're stumbling across the dichondra? I thought we were expected."

"We're not expected till ten-thirty," Jean said. "Ira didn't exactly make a point of it, but he mentioned they'd be doing other work till shortly after ten."

"Then I come on with the dice, eh? By the way, I didn't bring any along. Would these Guides

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keep sordid little items like that around?"

"It isn't going to be a crap game, silly," Jean informed him. "I told you Ira thinks these people can tell whether you were just lucky last week or whether you've developed some sort of special ability. They'll test you — somehow."

COMMAGER looked down at her curiously. Jean was a slim blonde who could look crisp as chilled lettuce after an afternoon of smashing tennis matches followed by an hour of diving practice off the high board. She wasn't intellectually inclined, but, understandably, Ira Bohart had never seemed to mind that. Neither did Commager. However, she seemed disturbed now.

"Are you beginning to get interested in that sort of thing yourself?" he inquired lightly.

"No," she said. "I'm just worried about that husband of mine. Honestly, Alan, this is as bad a metaphysical binge as he's ever been on! And some of those exercises he was showing me yesterday sort of scared me. If they do something like that tonight, I'd like to know what you think of it."

"It's just somebody else on the trail of the Bohart stocks and bonds, Jeannie! Ira will get disillusioned again before any harm is done. You know that, Jeannie."

"That's what I keep telling myself," Jean agreed unhappily. "But this time —"

Commager shook his head, parked the car and let her out, a block and a half from the Hawkes home. "Did you try any of those exercises yourself?"

"I'm not that loony," Jean said briefly. "Anyway, Ira advised me not to."

They walked back to the house in brooding silence. Between them, they'd seen Ira through a bout of Buddhism and successive experiences with three psychological fringe groups, in relentless pursuit of some form of control of the Higher Mind. After each such period, he would revert for a while to despondent normalcy.

Four years ago, it had seemed rather amusing to Commager, because then it had been Lona Commager and Ira Bohart who went questing after the Inexpressible together, while Alan Commager and Jean Bohart went sea-fishing or skin-diving off Catalina. But then Lona had died and the Inexpressible stopped being a source of amusement. Sometimes Ira bored Commager to death these days. But he still liked Jean.

"WHY PICK on me to expose these rascals anyway?" he asked as they came in

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sight of the house. "I may have surprised the boys at Las Vegas last week, but I couldn't tell a psychic phenomenon from a ringing in my ears."

She patted his arm. "That may be true, but you do intimidate people," she explained.

"Shucks!" Commager said modestly. It was true, though; he did. "So I'm to sit there and glare at them?"

"That's the idea. Just let them know you see through their little tricks and I'll bet they lose interest in Ira before the evening's out! Of course, you don't have to put it on too thick. . ."

Their host, Herbert Hawkes, for one, didn't look like a man who'd be easy to intimidate. He was as big as Commager himself and about the same age; an ex-football player, it turned out. He and Commager exchanging crushing hand-grips and soft smiles, as big men will, and released each other with mutual respect.

Ira, who didn't seem any more gaunt and haggard than usual, had appeared a little startled by their entry, possibly because they were early, but more likely, Commager thought, because of a girl who had coiled herself becomingly on the couch very close to Ira.

At first glance, this siren seemed no more than seventeen — a slender, brown-skinned creature in an afternoon dress the exact shade of her skin — but by the time they were being introduced, Commager had added twelve years to her probable age.

She was Ruth MacDonald, she told him, secretary of the Parapsychological Group of Long Beach. Had he heard of it? He said it sounded familiar, which was untrue, but it seemed to please Miss MacDonald.

The only other person present, a fifty-odd, graying teddy-bear of a man with very thick eyebrows, announced he was the Reverend Wilson Knox, president of the Temple of Antique Christianity. The Reverend, Commager realized, was pretty well plastered, though there was no liquor in sight.

THEIR INTERESTS might be unusual, but they hardly seemed sinister. Commager was practically certain he could identify Herbert Hawkes as the owner of one of the biggest downtown automobile agencies — which made him an unlikely sort of man to be a member of a group called the Guides. It was Hawkes's own affair, but it promised to make the evening more interesting than Commager had expected.

"Were we interrupting anything?" he inquired, looking around benevolently.

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Ira cleared his throat. "Well, as a matter of fact, Alan, we were conducting a series of experiments with me as the guinea-pig at the moment. Rather interesting actually —" He seemed a trifle nervous.

Commager avoided Jean's glance. "Why not just continue?"

"We can't," the Reverend Knox informed him solemnly. "Our high priestess was called to the telephone a few minutes ago. We must wait until she returns."

Ira explained hurriedly, "Mr. Knox is talking about Paylar. She's connected with the new group I'm interested in, the Guides. I suppose Jean told you about that?"

"A little." Commager waved his hand around. "But I thought *you* people were the Guides."

Hawkes smiled.

Wilson Knox looked startled. "Goodness, no, Mr. Commager! Though as a matter of fact —" he glanced somewhat warily at his two companions — "if someone here were a Guide, that person would be the only one who knew it! And, of course, Paylar. That's right, isn't it, Ruth?"

Miss MacDonald nodded and looked bored.

Jean said to Ira, "All I really told Alan was that some friends of yours would like to experiment with — well, whatever you think he was using in that crap game last week." She smiled brightly at the group. "Mr. Commager actually won eleven hundred dollars in fifteen minutes of playing!"

"Ah, anybody could if they kept the dice for fifteen minutes," Commager said airily. "Question of mind over matter, you know."

"Eleven hundred dollars? Phenomenal!" Wilson Knox came wide awake. "And may I ask, sir, whether you employ your powers as a professional gambler?"

Commager replied no, that professionally he was a collector, importer, wholesaler and retailer of tropical fish. Which was, as it happened, the truth, but the Reverend looked suspicious.

A DOOR opened then and two other people came in. One was a handsome though sullen-faced young man whose white-blond hair had been trimmed into a butch haircut. He was deeply tanned, wore a tee-shirt, white slacks, sneakers and looked generally as if he would be at home on Muscle Beach.

The other one had to be Paylar: a genuine Guide or, at least, a direct connection to them. She was downright cute in a slender, dark way. She might be in her early twenties. . .

But for a moment, as Commager stood up to be introduced, he had the confused impression

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that jungles and deserts and auroras mirrored in ice-flows had come walking into the room with her.

Well, well, he thought. Along with Hawkes, here was another real personality.

They didn't continue with the experiments on Ira. Wilson Knox reported Commager's feat in Las Vegas to Paylar, who seemed to know all about it, and then went bumbling on into a series of anecdotes about other dice manipulators he had known or heard about.

Except for the Boharts, the others listened with varying expressions of polite boredom. But Ira seemed genuinely fascinated by the subject and kept glancing at Commager, to see how he was taking it. Jean became argumentative.

"Nobody can really prove that anyone has such abilities!" she stated decisively. "Ira's been working around with this sort of thing for years and he's never shown me anything that couldn't have been a coincidence!"

Ira grinned apologetically. Wilson Knox sent a quick glance toward Paylar, who had settled herself in an armchair to Commager's left. The Reverend, Commager thought, seemed both miffed and curiously apprehensive.

Commager's own interest in the group became suddenly more lively.

"There are people in this world today, my dear young lady," Wilson Knox was telling Jean, "who control the Secret Powers of the Universe!"

Jean sighed. "When Ira tells me something like that, I always want to know why we don't hear what these mysterious people are doing."

WILSON KNOX glanced at Paylar again. And this time, Commager decided, there was no question about it: the odd little man seemed genuinely alarmed. The bushy eyebrows were working in unconcealed agitation.

"We must consider," he told Jean helplessly, "that such people may have their own reasons for not revealing their abilities."

"Hm!" sniffed Jean.

Commager laughed. "Mrs. Bohart has a point there, you know," he said to Paylar. "I understand the Guides imply they can, at any rate, train people to develop extrasensory abilities. Would you say they can produce some tangible proof for that claim?"

"Sometimes," she said. "With some people." She looked a little tired of the subject, as if it were something she had heard discussed often, as she probably had, so Commager was surprised when she added in the same tone, "I

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could, I think, produce such proofs very easily for you, Mr. Commager. To your own satisfaction, at least."

As she turned to look at him, her dark elfin face sober and confident, Commager was aware of a sudden stillness in the room. Wilson Knox started what seemed to be a protesting gesture and subsided again. And Jean was frowning, as if she had just discovered an unexpected uncertainty in herself.

"It's a fair offer," Commager acknowledged. "If you're suggesting an experiment, I'll be glad to cooperate."

For a moment, he saw something almost like compassion in the serious young face that studied him. Then Paylar turned to the others. "Would you arrange the lighting in the usual way? Mr. Commager, I should like you to sit here."

It was what they had come here for, Commager thought. Hawkes and the blond young man, whose name was Lex Barthold, went about the room adjusting the lights. Commager had a strong impression that Jean now would just as soon keep the experiment from being carried out, if she could think of a good enough reason.

But the experiment would be a flop anyway. No such half-mystical parlor games had worked on Commager since Lona had died.

II

IN COMMAGER'S tropical fish store on Wilshire Boulevard, there were display tanks that were laid out with the casual stateliness of an English park and others that had the formal delicacy of a Chinese garden or that appeared to copy, in fantastic miniature detail, sections of some dreamland salt-water reef. These were the designs of two artistically minded girls who managed the store for Commager and they were often expensively duplicated by artists themselves in the homes of the shop's less talented patrons.

But the tanks that most interested Commager were the big ones in the back of the store, partitioned off from the plate-glass windows and the displays that faced the boulevard. Here fish and plants were bred, raised and stocked without regard for art, and the effect, when you sat down to watch them for a while, was that of being in the center of a secret, green-lit jungle out of which God knew what might presently come soaring, wriggling or crawling at you.

It wasn't a bad way, in Commager's opinion, to pass a few hours at night, when you didn't

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happen to be in a mood either for sleep or human company. In his case, that might happen once or twice a week, or perhaps less than once a month. When it happened more often, it was time to get organized for another one of those trips that would wind up at some warm and imprcbable point on the big globe of Earth, where people were waiting to help Commager fill his transport tanks with brightly colored little water-creatures — which, rather surprisingly, provided him with a very good income.

It was a pattern he had followed for most of the second half of his thirty-four years, the only two interruptions having been the second world war and the nineteen months he'd been married to Lona.

It was odd, he thought, that he'd never found anything more important to do with his life than that, but the personal games he could watch people play didn't seem to be even as interesting as the one he'd chosen for himself.

Also, he went on thinking half-seriously, if you got right down to it, probably all the important elements of life were contained right inside the big tank he was observing at the moment, so that if he could really understand what was going on in there, brightly and stealthily among the green underwater thickets, he might know all that could be known about the entire Universe.

Considered in that light, the tank became as fascinating as a stage play in a foreign language, in which the actors wore the bright masks of magic and played games that weren't so very unlike those being played by human beings. But any real understanding of the purpose of the play, human or otherwise, always had seemed a little beyond Commager's reach.

HE YAWNED and shifted position in the chair he had pulled up for himself. Perhaps he was simply a bit more stupid than most. But there was a fretting feeling that this game playing, whether on a large scale or a small one, never really led to much, beyond some more of the same. There was, he conceded, a good deal of satisfaction in it for a time, but in the long run, the returns started to diminish.

It seemed that things — in some way Commager couldn't quite fathom — should have been arranged differently.

A car passing on the street outside sent a whisper of sound along the edge of his consciousness. With that came the awareness that it had been some time since he'd last heard a car go by and he found himself wondering

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suddenly what time of night it was.

He glanced at his wristwatch. Three-thirty. A little startled, he tried to compute how long he had been sitting there.

Then it struck him in a surge of panic that he couldn't remember coming to the store at all!

But, of course, his memory told him, you went with Jean to that house. . .

And Paylar had asked him to sit down and . . .

What kind of stunt had she pulled on him?

The blackness of terror burst into his consciousness as soon as his thoughts carried him that far — and it wiped out memory. He tried again.

A black explosion. He pushed at it and it retreated a little.

It had been between ten and eleven o'clock. Five hours or so ago. What was the last specific thing he could remember?

HE HAD been sitting in a chair, his eyes closed, a little amused, a little bored. It had been going on for some time. Paylar, a quiet voice off to his left, was asking him a series of odd questions.

PAYLAR: But where are *you,* Mr. Commager?

COMMAGER: (tapping his forehead): Right here! Inside my head.

PAYLAR: Could you be more specific about that?

COMMAGER (laughing): I'm somewhere between my ears. Or somewhere back of my eyes.

PAYLAR: How far do you seem to be from the right side of your head? Do you sense the exact distance?

Commager discovered he could sense the exact distance. As a point of awareness, he seemed to be located an inch inside the right side of his skull. Simultaneously, though, he noticed that his left ear was less than an inch and a half away from the same spot — which gave him briefly an odd impression of the general shape of his head!

But he realized then that his attention was shifting around in there, rapidly and imperceptibly. His ears seemed to be now above him, now below and, for a moment, the top of his skull seemed to have moved at least a yard away.

He laughed. "How am I doing?"

Paylar didn't answer. Instead, she asked him to imagine that he was looking at the wall in front of him.

After a while, that wasn't too difficult; Commager seemed to be seeing the wall clearly enough, with a standing lamp in either corner, where Hawkes had placed them. Next, the voice told him

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to imagine that the same wall now was only a few inches in front of his face — and then that it suddenly had moved six feet behind him. It gave him an odd feeling of having passed straight through the wall in the moment of shifting it.

"Put it twenty feet in front of you again," she said. "And now twenty feet behind you."

Again the sensation of shifting in space, as if he were swinging back and forth, past and through the wall. Commager had become alert and curious now.

On the third swing, he went straight into the blackness . . . with panic howling around him! After that, everything was blotted out.

HE COULDN'T, Commager discovered, close the gap any farther now. Somewhere near eleven o'clock in the evening, he'd gone into that mental blackout with its peculiarly unpleasant side-effects. His next memory might have been twenty minutes ago, when he found himself staring into the miniature underwater forest of the fish tank in his store.

He could phone the Bohart apartment, he thought, and find out what actually had happened. Immediately, then, he became aware of an immense reluctance to carry out that notion and he grimaced irritably. It was no time to worry about what the Boharts might think, but he could imagine Jean's sleepy voice, annoyedly asking who was calling at this hour.

And he'd say, "Well, look, I've lost my memory, I'm afraid. A piece of it anyway —"

He shook his head. They'd gone there to show up the Guides, after all! He'd have to work this out by himself. As if in response to his line of thought, the office telephone, up in the front of the store, began ringing sharply.

The unexpected sound jolted Commager into a set of chills. He sat there stiffly, while the ring was repeated four times; and then, because there was really no reason not to answer it, no matter how improbable it was that someone would be calling the store at this time of night, he got up and started toward the telephone down the long aisle of back-store tanks. Here and there, one of the tanks was illuminated by overhead lights, like the one before which he'd been sitting.

At the corner, where he turned from the aisle into the office, something lay in his path.

He almost stepped on it. He stopped in shock.

It was a slender woman, lying half on her side, half on her face, in a rumpled dress and something like a short white fur jacket.

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Her loose hair hid her face.

The telephone kept on shrilling.

COMMAGER dropped to one knee beside the woman, touched her and knew she was dead, turned her over by the shoulders and felt a stickiness on his hands. There was a slanting cut across her throat, black in the shadows.

"Well," a voice inside Commager's head said with insane calm, "if it isn't Miss MacDonald!" He felt no pity for her at the moment and no real alarm, only a vast amazement.

He realized that the telephone had stopped ringing and clusters of thought burst suddenly and coherently into his awareness again. Somebody apparently thought he was here, at three-thirty in the morning — the same somebody might also suspect that Miss MacDonald was here and even in what condition. And the phone could have been dialed quite deliberately at that moment to bring Commager out of the hypnotized or doped trance, or whatever it was that somebody knew he was trapped in.

In which case, they might be wanting him to discover Ruth MacDonald's body at about this time.

It would be better, he thought, not to get tangled up just now in wondering why anyone should want that to happen; or even whether, just possibly, it had been he himself who had cut Miss MacDonald's brown throat.

What mattered was that, at this instant, somebody was expecting him to react as reasonably as a shocked and stunned man could react in such a situation.

The only really reasonable course of action open to him was to call the police promptly — wherefore, if his curiously calm assumption was correct, he would be primarily expected to do just that. It would be much less reasonable, though still not too unlikely, to carry that ghastly little body far off somewhere and lose it.

Or he could just walk out of here and leave Miss MacDonald on the floor, to be discovered by the store's staff in the morning. That would be a stupid thing to do, but still something that might be expected of a sufficiently dazed and frightened man.

So he wouldn't do any of those things! The hunch was strong in him that the best way to react just now was in a manner unreasonable beyond all calculation.

HE SHOVED Ruth MacDonald's body aside and flicked on his cigarette lighter. On the floor were gummily smeared

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spots, but she had bled to death somewhere else before she had been dropped here!

Commager's hands and clothes were clean, so it was very improbable that he had carried her in. The sensible thing, he thought, would be to clean up the few stains on the floor before he left, removing any obvious evidence that Miss MacDonald had been in the store at all.

Wherefore, he didn't bother to do it.

Nor did he waste time wondering whether a half dozen tanks in the back part of the store had been lit when he came in here or not. There was a variety of possible reasons why someone might have left a light on over some of them.

He picked up the slender stiffening body on the floor and carried it to the front door.

The door was unlocked and his Hudson was at the curb. He shifted Miss MacDonald to one arm, locked the store door behind him, then placed her in the back seat of the car.

Even Wilshire Boulevard was a lonely street at this hour, but he saw several sets of headlights coming toward him as he got into the car and started it. As far as he could make out, there hadn't been any blood spilled around inside the Hudson, either.

Twelve minutes later, he drove past the corner house he'd visited with Jean Bohart some time before ten in the evening. There was a light on in one of the rooms upstairs, which distinguished Herbert Hawkes's home from any other house in sight. A few blocks away, a dog began to bark.

Dogs might be a problem, he thought.

COMMAGER parked the car a few hundred feet away and sat still for perhaps a minute, listening. The dog stopped barking. Headlights crossed an intersection a few blocks ahead of him.

He got out, lifted Miss MacDonald's body out of the car and walked unhurriedly back to the corner house and over the stepping stones of the dichondra lawn to the side of the house. Here was a trellis, with a gate in it, half open.

Commager eased his burden sideways through the gate. In the half-light of early morning, he set Ruth MacDonald down under a bush — which partly concealed her — in about the same position in which he'd found her. He had a moment of pity to spare for her now.

But there was motion inside the house. Commager looked at the door that opened into this side garden. A vague sequence of motions; somebody walking quiet-

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ly — but without any suggestion of stealth — was coming closer to the door. Commager stepped quietly up to the wall beside the door and flattened himself against the wall.

A key clicked in the lock. The door swung open. A big shape sauntered out.

Commager's fist was cocked and he struck hard, slanting upward, for the side of the neck and the jaw. . .

He laid Herbert Hawkes down beside the body of Ruth MacDonald, one big arm draped across her shoulders.

Let the Guides figure that one out, he thought wearily. Not that they wouldn't, of course, but he was going to continue to react unreasonably.

Twenty minutes later, he was in his apartment and sound asleep.

III

THE BEDSIDE phone buzzed waspishly. Commager hung for a moment between two levels of awareness. The blazing excitement of the fight was over, but he still hated to relinquish the wild, cold, clear loneliness of the blue —

The thin droning continued to ram at his eardrums. His eyes opened and he sat up, reaching for the telephone as he glanced at the clock beside it. 8:15.

"Alan? I think it worked! Ira had breakfast and drove off to the office, wrapped in deep thought. You were terrific, simply terrific! Just sitting there like a stone wall —"

Commager blinked, trying to catch up with her. Jean Bohart had an athlete's healthy contempt for lie-a-beds and felt no compunction about jolting them out of their torpor. She probably assumed he'd been up and around for the past two hours.

Then his waking memories suddenly flooded back. He sucked in a shocked breath.

"Eh?" She sounded startled.

"I didn't say anything," he managed. "Go ahead —"

He wouldn't, he realized presently, have to ask Jean any leading questions. There was a nervous tension in her that, on occation, found its outlet in a burst of one-way conversation and this was such an occasion. The Boharts had left the Hawkes home shortly before twelve, Ira apparently depressed by the negative results of the evening. The Reverend Knox had made a phone call somewhat earlier and had been picked up within a few minutes by an elderly woman who, in Jean's phrasing, looked like a French bulldog.

"I think he was glad to get out of there!" she added.

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COMMAGER didn't comment on that. He himself had stayed on with the others. Ruth MacDonald, in Jean's opinion, was making a pretty definite play for him by that time, while Paylar — "What's her last name, anyway?" — had become withdrawn to the point of rudeness after Commager's spectacular lack of reaction to her psychological games.

"I think she knew just what we were doing by then!" Jean's voice held considerable satisfaction. "So did that Hawkes character. Did you know he's the Herbert Hawkes who owned the Hawkes Chrysler Agency on Figueroa? Well, there's something interesting about that —"

Hawkes had sold out his business about eight months before and it was generally known that his reason had been an imminent nervous breakdown. "What do you make of that, Alan?"

Offhand, Commager admitted, he didn't know what to make of it.

Well, Jean interrupted, she was convinced Hawkes had gone the way Ira would have gone if they hadn't stopped him. "Those Guides have him hypnotized or something!" She laughed nervously. "Does it sound as if I'm getting too dramatic about it?"

"No," he said, recalling his last glimpse of Hawkes and his horrid little companion much too vividly. "He doesn't strike me as acting like a man who's been hypnotized, though. Not that I know much about that sort of thing."

Jean was silent, thinking. "Did anything in particular develop between you and the MacDonald?" she asked suddenly. There was a strange sharpness in her tone.

Commager felt himself whiten. "No," he said, "I just went home by and by." He tried for a teasing "Are you jealous, little pal?" note. "Were you worrying about it?"

"She's poison, that's all!" Jean said sharply.

AFTER SHE hung up, Commager showered, shaved, dressed and breakfasted, with very little awareness of what he was doing. He was in a frame of mind he didn't entirely understand himself; under a flow of decidedly unpleasant speculations was a layer of tingling, almost physical elation which, when he stopped to consider it, appeared a less than intelligent response to his present situation. But the realization didn't seem to affect the feeling.

The feeling vanished abruptly when he dumped the clothes he'd been wearing the night before out of the laundry bag into which he had stuffed them, along with

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the blanket on which he'd laid Ruth MacDonald's body in the car.

He had handled her with some caution and he couldn't discover marks on any of those articles now that seemed likely to incriminate him. But he had no doubt that a more competent investigation could reveal them.

The odd thing was that he still couldn't get himself to worry about such an investigation! He had no logical basis for his belief that unless he himself announced the murder of the secretary of the Parapsychological Group of Long Beach, nobody else was going to take that step. He couldn't even disprove that he hadn't, somewhere along the line last night, dropped into sheer criminal lunacy.

But, so far, nobody had come pounding at his door to accuse him of murder. And Commager retained the irrationally obstinate conviction that nobody would.

He had an equally strong conviction that he had become the target of the relentless hostility of a group of people, of whose existence he hadn't known until the day before — and that he wouldn't know why until he discovered the reason for his loss of conscious memory in a period during which he had, to Jean Bohart's discerning eyes, showed no noticeable change in behavior.

And, Commager decided finally, he'd better not let the lack of satisfactory conscious evidence for either certainty affect his actions just now.

HE MADE two appointments by telephone and left the apartment an hour after he'd been wakened. A few minutes later, he was at the store, which would open for business at ten o'clock.

Commager unlocked the door and strolled inside. The store's staff had got there at nine and the floors, he noticed, had been thoroughly mopped. Nobody inquired whether he'd been in during the night, so it seemed he had guessed right in leaving the lights on over the big tanks.

He drove into Los Angeles then, to keep his first appointment, at Dr. Henry L. Warbutt's Psychology Center.

Henry was a stout, white-haired, energetic little man with the dark melancholy eyes of one of the great apes. "Thirty minutes for free is all I can spare, even for orphans," he informed Commager. "But you're welcome to that, so come in and sit down, boy! Cup of tea, eh? What do you hear from the Boharts?"

Commager declined the tea, which was likely to be some nasty kind of disguised health-brew, and stated that the Boharts, when

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last heard from, had been doing fine. It wasn't his first visit to the Center. Both of his parents had been dead before he was twelve and Henry, who was a relative on his father's side, had been his legal guardian until he came of age.

"I want to find out what you know about a new local organization called the Guides," Commager explained. "They're on the metaphysical side, I'd say, but they seen to be doing some therapy work. They're not listed in the telephone book."

Henry looked slightly disturbed. "If you mean the Guides I'm thinking of, they're not so new. How did you hear about them? Is Ira messing around with that outfit now?"

Commager told him briefly of last night's earlier events, presenting Jean Bohart's version of his own role in them, as if that were the way he recalled it himself.

HENRY became interested at that point. "Do you remember just what those exercises were that the woman put you through?"

When Commager had described them, he nodded. "They got those gimmicks from another group. I've used them myself now and then. Not on cash clients, of course, just as an experiment. The idea is to divert your attention away from your body-ego, if you know what I mean. No? Well, then —"

He made a steeple of his hands and scowled at his fingertips. "Metaphysically, it's sometimes used as a method to get you out of your physical body." He waved his hands vaguely around. "Off you go into the astral plane or something!" He grinned. "Understand now?"

"More or less," Commager said doubtfully. "Did you ever see it happen?"

"Eh? Oh, no! With me, they usually just go to sleep. Or else they get bored and won't react at all, about like you did. There's no therapeutic value in it that I know of. But probably no harm, either."

"Would you say whether there's any harm in the Guides?"

"Well," said Henry thoughtfully, "they're certainly one of the more interesting groups of our local psychological fauna. Personally, I wouldn't go out of my way to antagonize them. Of course, Ira's such a damn fool, you probably had to do something pretty obvious to discourage him. Fifteen or twenty years ago, the Guides were working principally with drugs, as far as I could make out at the time. I don't know whether this is the same organization or not, but just

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lately — the last year or so — I've been hearing gossip about them again."

"What kind of gossip?"

"WELL, YOU know a good many of the people who come into this Center for therapy are interested in metaphysics in one way or another," Henry explained. "Some of them have been telling me lately that the Guides are the latest thing in a True Group. And a True Group, in their language, means chiefly that the people in it have some honest-to-goodness supernatural abilities and powers!"

He grimaced unhappily. "Another characteristic is that nobody else knows exactly who belongs to a True Group. In that way, your acquaintances seem to be living up to the legend."

Commager said he'd been under the impression that the Guides dealt in parapsychology.

Henry nodded. "Well, they'd use that, too, of course! Depending on the class of client —" He hesitated briefly. "By and large, I'd say the Guides were a very good outfit for fairly normal citizens like you and the Boharts to stay away from!"

He'd also heard of the Reverend Wilson Knox and of the Temple of Antique Christianity, though not favorably.

"Knox has a crummy little sect back in one of the Hollywood canyons. They go in for Greek paganism. Strictly a screwball group." He didn't know anything of the Parapsychological Group of Long Beach. "You can't keep up with all of them."

IV

JULIUS SAVAGE was a lanky, sun-browned hypnotist who'd sometimes gone spear-fishing with Commager. On one such occasion — the last, if Julius had anything to say about it — Commager had been obliged to haul him half-drowned out of a kelp bed and thump him back into consciousness. Which made him the right man right now.

He clasped his hands behind his head, rocked himself back from his desk and looked first interested and then highly dubious, while Commager went on talking.

"You're about as lousy a hypnotic subject as I am myself, Alan!" Julius protested finally. "I tried to put you under twice, remember? Anyway, how about sending you to my tame M.D. for a check-up first? Amnesia isn't anything to — No?" He considered. "Well, how long ago did this happen?"

The fact that it had happened only the night before reassured him somewhat. So presently

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Commager was sitting in an armchair being informed that his eyelids were getting heavier and heavier.

An hour later, Julius said discouragedly, "This isn't getting us anywhere and I've got another appointment at two o'clock! How bad do you want that information, Alan?"

"It's a matter of life and death!"

"Oh, hell!" said Julius. He went out of the room and came back with a small bottle, partly filled with a slightly oily, aromatic liquid. "I don't use this often, but — By the way, with the possible exception of last night, did anyone else ever try to hypnotize you?"

"Ira Bohart did, the first time I met him," Commager recalled. "It was at a party. No results."

"We'll make it two spoonfuls," Julius decided.

TEN MINUTES later, Commager got into the blackness. The next time he consciously opened his eyes, it was past three in the afternoon. Julius, looking pale and exhausted, stood at the desk watching him. He'd loosened his tie and hung his jacket over the back of a chair. His hair was disheveled.

"Brother!" he remarked. "Well, we got something, Alan. I'll play parts of it back to you." He jerked his head at a gently burbling percolator on a mantel. "Cup of coffee there for you. Better have some."

Commager sipped black coffee, yawned, and took note of the time. Too much of the day already was past, he thought uneasily; he wondered what the Guides had been doing meanwhile. "What happened to your appointments?"

"Canceled them," Julius said, fiddling with the tape recorder. "They'll keep." He glanced around at Commager. "Here's the first thing we got. Chronologically, it seems to fit in at the end of the period you can't remember. Symbolism, but I'm curious. We'll try it first."

Commager listened. After a while, there were pricklings of memory. When Julius stopped the recorder, he remarked, "I had a dream this morning that seems to tie in with that."

"Ah?" Julius looked professionally cautious. "Well, let's hear about it."

Commager hesitated. The dream seemed irrelevant and rather childish, like a fairy tale. He'd been flying around in a great open space, he began at last. And he'd been wondering why nobody else was up there with him, but he hadn't felt particularly concerned about it. Then a hawk came swooping at

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him, trying to knock him out of the air.

There was a long leash attached to the hawk's leg and Commager noticed that, far down below, a number of people were holding the leash and watching the battle. "That explained why there wasn't anyone else around, you see. When anyone tried it, they simply sent a hawk up after him."

"Hm!" said Julius. "Recognize the people?"

"No —" Commager checked himself and laughed. "Of course, it just struck me! Hawkes was the name of one of the people I met last night! That explains the dream!"

Julius nodded doubtfully. "Possibly. How did it continue?"

AS COMMAGER recalled it, there hadn't been much more to it. He couldn't damage the hawk and the hawk couldn't bring him down; finally it disappeared. Then he'd been up there alone . . . and then he'd been wakened by the telephone.

Julius tapped the desk with the eraser end of a pencil, looking thoughtful. "Well —" he sighed. He turned to the recorder. "Let's try another part of this now, Alan. The central part. Incidentally, we didn't get into what you were actually doing last night. These are your subjective impressions and they aren't necessarily an immediately recognizable reflection of real events, past or present. You understand that?"

Commager said he did. But he felt a stab of sharp apprehension. He was reasonably certain that whatever Julius heard or guessed in his office remained a private matter. But his own line of action had been based on the solid personal conviction that, whatever had happened last night, it hadn't been he who had killed Ruth MacDonald.

In view of the hypnotist's careful and almost formal phrasing, Commager was, for a few moments at least, not quite so sure about that.

They were a bad few moments. . .

Then the recorder was turning again.

"WHAT DO you make of it?" Julius asked. "It will help me formulate my own opinion."

Commager shrugged. He still felt shaken, after the intermittent waves of grief, rage and remorse that had pounded through him while a section of the tape rewound itself again — with a vividness and immediacy that dazed him, but still seemed rather unaccountable. After all, that had been over and done with almost four years ago!

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"It's fairly obvious to me," he said reluctantly. At least his voice sounded steady enough. "A few months before my wife died, I'd begun to get interested in the ESP experiments she was playing around with. You remember Lona was almost as bad that way as Ira Bohart."

He managed a brief, careful grin. "It annoyed me at first, but, of course, I didn't let her know. I thought she'd drop it soon enough. When she didn't, I decided I'd experiment on the quiet by myself. Actually, I was after information I could use to convince Lona she was wasting her time with that sort of thing — and then she'd have more time to spare for the kind of fun and games I was interested in."

Julius smiled faintly and nodded.

"I STARTED making lists of coincidences," Commager explained. "Occasions when I'd tell myself Lona would be home at six, say, and she'd actually show up about that time. Or I'd decide what dress she'd select to wear next morning —"

"Predictions, generally?" Julius drew a precise little circle on the desk blotter with his pencil and studied it critically.

"Yes. Or I'd put the idea into her head that she wanted to talk about some particular thing with me — and sometimes she would!" Commager smiled. "I was also, you see, keeping a list of the times these little experiments didn't work out, and they often didn't, at first. So that, when I told Lona about it finally, it would be obvious that the coincidences had been just that."

He hesitated. "I still think they were just that. But one day, it struck me I'd accumulated too many coincidences lately. It shook me."

"Did it stop your experimentation?" Julius remained intent on his art work.

"A few days later, it did," Commager said. He discovered suddenly that he was sweating. "Lona phoned me that afternoon that she was driving down to the beach to pick me up. After she hung up, I had a sudden positive feeling that if she drove her car that afternoon, she'd get killed! I almost called her back. But I decided I wasn't going to turn into another Ira Bohart. As of then, I was quitting all this ESP business and so was Lona! When she got there, I'd tell her —"

The sweat was running down his face now. "Well, you know that part of it. Lona had a heart attack while driving, the doctors thought, and crashed and got killed." He paused again, because his voice had begun to shake. "I don't know why that got on there

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—" he nodded at the recorder — "except that last night was the first time since that I felt, even for a minute, that something might be going on that couldn't be explained in a perfectly normal way!"

"THAT," inquired Julius, "was while you were going through that peculiar set of exercises you were describing, wasn't it? Alan, how long ago has it been, exactly, since your wife died?"

"Not quite four years." Commager drove back a surge of impatience. "I suppose I've felt guilty enough about it ever since! But right now, Julius, I'm interested in finding out why I lost a few hours of memory last night and how to restore them. Are we getting any closer to that?"

"I think we are. Can you be at this office at 10 A.M. two days from tomorrow? That's Thursday morning —"

"Why should I come here then?"

Julius shrugged. "Because that's the earliest appointment I could make for you with Dr. Ciardi. I phoned him just before you woke up. He's a friend of mine and an excellent psychiatrist, Alan. We do a lot of work together."

Commager said in angry amazement, "Damn you, Julius! I told you I didn't want anyone else to know about this!"

"I know," Julius admitted unhappily. "We've been fairly good friends for about eight years now, haven't we? We've been in and out of each other's homes and met each other's acquaintances, right?"

Commager's fingertips drummed on his right knee. He was still furious. "So what?"

"So *hell,* Alan! What you were telling me just now never happened! Your wife wasn't killed in an auto accident four years ago because, four years ago, you didn't have a wife! To the best of my knowledge, you've never been married!"

V

COMMAGER had a rather early dinner at Tilford's. A mirror lined the entire wall on the opposite side of the room; now and then, he glanced at himself. For a sort of lunatic, he thought, the big, sun-tanned man sitting there looked remarkably calm and healthy.

He was still amazed, above all, at the apparent instantaneousness with which he had realized that what Julius had blurted out was true! He could picture Lona in a hundred different ways, very vividly, but he couldn't actually recall having ever mentioned her

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to anybody else! And he couldn't now remember a single time when he and she and any other person had been together.

It was almost as if the entire episode of Lona had been a story somebody had told him, illustrated out of his own imaginings. And now, in a few hours, the story was beginning to fade out. Specific scenes had dropped almost beyond the reach of memory. The image of Lona herself started to blur.

HIS immediate reaction had been an odd mixture of shocked self-disgust and profound relief, threaded with the feeling that actually he'd always known, without being consciously aware of it, that there wasn't any real Lona.

Even the emotions he'd felt while listening to the tape recorder were a part of the fabrication; almost at the instant of realization, they began to break away from him. Like the sudden shattering of a hard shell of alien matter, Commager thought, which he'd been dragging around, rather like a hermit-crab, under the pretense that it was a natural part of himself. The self-disgust became even more pronounced at that comparison.

But whatever his original motives had been for imposing that monstrous construction upon his mind, Commager couldn't see any further connection between it and the events of the past night.

Apparently he had thrust himself into a period of amnesia to avoid the full impact of an artificial set of emotions. In that period, there had been a very real and very unpleasant occurrence — a murder.

His main reason now for remaining convinced that he hadn't been the murderer was that the evening papers carried no indication that the body of Ruth MacDonald had been found.

Which certainly indicated guilt on the part of those who must have found her.

He could afford to wait until Thursday, Commager decided, to go digging after the causes of his delusion under Dr. Ciardi's guidance. But he probably couldn't afford to wait at all to find out what the Guides — he still had to assume it was the Guides — were preparing for him next.

And perhaps the best way to find out would be, quite simply, to ask.

HE FINISHED his dinner, walked up the street to a telephone booth and dialed the number of Herbert Hawkes's home. A man's voice informed him presently that it was the Hawkes residence, Lex Barthold speaking.

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That, Commager recalled, was the name of the blond young man who had been an untalkative member of the party last night. He gave his own name and said he was trying to contact Miss Paylar — a piece of information which produced a silence of several seconds at the other end. But when Barthold spoke again, he sounded unshaken.

"Paylar isn't in at the moment. Shall I take your message, Mr. Commager?"

Commager said no, he'd try again, and hung up. Now that, he reflected, walking back to his car, seemed to be an interesting sort of household!

For the first time since leaving Julius's office, he wasn't too displeased with himself. If he saw Paylar alone, he might, as far as appearances went, be taking an interest in the well-being of Ira Bohart or, reasonably enough, in Paylar herself.

And things could start developing from that point.

Of course, she might avoid letting him see her alone. In any case, his call would give them something new to consider.

He drove to the beach and turned south toward San Diego. A half hour later, he parked before the cabin where, among bulkier items of fishing gear, he kept a 45-caliber revolver. He put that in the glove compartment of the car and started back to town.

THE TELEPHONE rang a few minutes after he reached his apartment.

"I've called you twice in the last hour," Paylar said. "I understand you want to speak to me."

"I do," said Commager. "Do you happen to have the evening free?"

She laughed. "I've arranged to have it free. You can meet me at your aquarium store, Mr. Commager."

"Eh?" he said stupidly.

"At your store." Her voice still sounded amused. "You see, I may have a business proposition for you."

Then the line went dead.

Commager swore and hung up. When he turned into Wilshire Boulevard not very many minutes later, he saw a long gray car, vague under the street lights, move away from the curb a hundred feet or so beyond his store and drive off. There was no sign of Paylar.

He parked and followed the car thoughtfully with his eyes. Then he got out. The store was locked, the interior dark. But in back of the office, behind the partition, was a shimmering of light.

He thought of the gun in his car. There had been one murder.

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It seemed a little early for another one.

He unlocked the door and locked it again behind him. This time, there were no bodies lying around the aisles. But at the back of the store, standing before a lighted fish tank and looking into it, Paylar was waiting for him.

HE DIDN'T ask her how she got in. It seemed a theatrical gesture, a boasting indication that his affairs could be easily invaded from without. Aside from that, the darkened store undoubtedly was a nice place for an ambush. Commager wondered briefly why he didn't feel more concerned about that and realized then that he was enormously angry. An ambush might have been a relief.

"Did you find out much about us today?" Paylar asked.

"Not enough," he admitted. "Perhaps you can tell me more."

"That's why I'm here."

Commager looked at her skeptically. She was wearing a black sweater and slacks that appeared wine-colored in the inadequate light from the big tank. A small, finely shaped body and a small, vivid face. The mouth smiled soberly; black eyes gleamed like an animal's as she turned her head toward him.

"We're an organization," she said, "that operates against the development of parapsychological abilities in human beings. . ."

Oddly enough, it made sense and he found himself believing her. Then he laughed. "Do you object to my winning a crap game?"

Paylar said seriously, "We don't object to that. But you're not stopping there, Mr. Commager."

Again there was an instant of inner agreement; an elation and anxiety. Commager hesitated, startled by his reaction. He said, "I'm not aware of any ambition along that line."

She shook her head. "I don't think you're being quite truthful. But it doesn't really matter how aware you are of it just now. The last twenty-four hours have indicated clearly that you can't be checked by any ordinary methods." She frowned. "The possibility had been foreseen — and so we hit you with everything that was immediately available, Mr. Commager. I was sure it was enough."

Commager felt a little bewildered. "Enough for what?"

"Why, almost anybody else would have done something sensible — and then refused to ever budge out of the everyday world again, even in his thoughts. Instead, you turned around and started to smoke us out — which, incidentally, saved you for the

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moment from an even more unnerving experience!"

COMMAGER stared at her, appalled. That final comment had no present meaning for him, but she obviously was speaking about a murder of which she, at the very least, had known at the time. She considered it mildly amusing that it had back-fired on them!

He said harshly, "I'd enjoy breaking your neck. But I suspect that you're a little crazy."

She shrugged, smiling. "The trouble is that you're not going to go on thinking that, Mr. Commager. If you did, we could safely disregard you."

He looked down at his hands. "So what are you going to do?"

"There are others who say you can be stopped. It's certain you won't like their methods, though I'm not entirely sure they will be effective. I came here tonight to offer you an alternative."

"Go ahead and offer it."

"You can join us," she said.

Commager gave a short laugh of sheer astonishment. "Now why

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should I want to do that?"

"In the end," Paylar said soberly, "you may have very little choice! But there's another reason. You've been trying, all your life, to bring your abilities into your consciousness and under your control."

He shook his head. "If you mean wild talents, I haven't done anything of the sort."

"Unfortunately," she said, "you won't remain unaware of that trend in yourself very much longer. And, if you cooperate with us, we can and will help you to do just that. But we can't let you continue by yourself, without safeguards. You're too likely to be successful, you see. Those wild talents can become extremely wild!"

"You know," he said, almost good-humoredly, "I think you really believe what you say. But as far as I'm concerned, you're a group of criminal lunatics without any more secret ability than I have myself —"

"That," Paylar replied undisturbed, "is precisely what we're afraid of. For the time being,

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though, we can use our abilities in ways that you cannot. What happened while you were doing those exercises last night, Mr. Commager?"

He looked at her and then away. "I got rather bored."

PAYLAR laughed. "You're lying! Exercises of that kind provide very convincing illusions, and very little else, for people who are hungry for illusion. But since you have an ability, it took no more than a word to bring it into action! That was when we knew you had to be stopped. However, I'm afraid you're still turning down my offer."

"You read my mind that time, lady! I'd turn you over to the police, too, if I thought it would do any good."

"It wouldn't," she assured him. Her head tilted a moment, with soft grace, into an attitude of listening. "I think my car is coming back for me. I'll leave that offer open, Mr. Commager — in case you survive long enough now to except it!"

He grinned. "You shouldn't frighten me like that."

"I've frightened you a little, but not nearly enough. But there is more than one way to shake a man to his senses — or out of them — so perhaps we can still change your mind. Would you let me out the front door now?"

Lights slid over the ceiling above her as she spoke, and the long gray car, its engine throbbing, stood at the curb when they came out. Paylar turned at the car door.

"You know where I'm staying," she said, looking up at him, "if you want to find me."

Commager nodded.

She smiled and then the door opened for her and light briefly filled the interior of the car.

Seconds later, he stood staring after it as it fled down the street. She'd been right about there being more than one way of shaking a man out of his senses.

The driver of the car — the very much alive driver — had been Ruth MacDonald!

UNDER WHAT wasn't quite a full Moon tonight, the Bay would have looked artificial if it hadn't been so huge. A savage, wild place, incongruous in this area with the slow thump and swirl and thunder of the tide.

A mile to the south was a cluster of cottages down near the water's edge. Commager's cabin was as close as anything could have been built to the flank of the big northern drop-off. He could look down at the sharp turn of the highway below him or out at the Bay. Nobody yet had tried to build on the rocky rises of ground behind him.

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Without ordinary distractions, it was a good place for a few hours of painstaking reorientation. He wasn't exactly frightened, Commager told himself. But when he had recognized Ruth MacDonald, a wave of unreason inside him had seemed to rise to meet and merge with the greater wave of unreason rolling in from a shadow-world without. For that moment, the rules of reality had flickered out of existence.

An instant later, he'd had them solidly re-established. He was now simply a man who knew something had happened that he couldn't begin to explain rationally. It was a much more acceptable situation, since it included the obvious explanation of irrationality.

On Thursday morning, he could tell Dr. Ciardi, "Look, Doc, I'm having hallucinations. The last one was a honey. I thought I was carrying a dead woman all over town! What do we do about it?"

And they'd do whatever was done in such circumstances and it would be a sane, normal, active life for Alan Commager forever after — with a woman more or less like Jean Bohart to live it with, which would keep out the shadowy Lonas. With everything, in fact, that didn't fit into that kind of life, that belonged to the shadow-worlds, as completely obliterated and forgotten as they could become.

Commager wondered what made that picture look so unsatisfactory.

IT STRUCK him suddenly that, according to Paylar, this was exactly how the Guides had expected him to react as soon as her little games had steered him into a bout of amnesia and hallucinations. They'd wanted, she'd said, in approximately those words, to put him in a frame of mind that would make him refuse to ever budge out of the safe, everyday world again, even in his thoughts.

Commager grimaced. But they'd become convinced then that he wasn't going to do it!

He might do it all the same, he thought. But the reason it couldn't be a completely satisfactory solution was growing clear. One couldn't discount the probability that there was a little more to the shadow-worlds than lunacy and shadow. Perhaps only a very little more and perhaps not. But if he avoided looking at what was there, he would never find out.

And then he realized that he wasn't going to avoid looking at it, hadn't really been seriously considering it. He swore at himself, because avoidance did seem

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still the simple and rational solution, providing one could be satisfied with it.

He couldn't be satisfied with it and that was that. He could see now that if an organization such as Paylar had described the Guides to be existed, and if it were composed, at least in part, of people who really had developed an understanding and working knowledge of the possibilities of psi, it would be in a uniquely favorable position to control and check the development of similar abilities in others.

Its connections and its influence would be primarily with the psychological fringe groups here and with their analogs elsewhere; and the people who were drawn to such groups would be those who were dissatisfied with or incompetent in normal lines of activity, and had become abnormally interested in compensating for their lack of other achievement by investigating the shadowy, vague, ego-bolstering promise of psi.

And people frightened by the threat of total war, driven into a search for psychic refuge by the prospect of physical destruction.

In either case, because they were uncertain, less than normally capable people, they could be controlled without too much difficulty — and carefully diverted then, in groups or as individuals, from the thing they were seeking and might stumble upon!

The exercises she'd demonstrated to him, Paylar had said, were designed primarily to provide convincing illusions for those who were hungry for illusion.

SHE AND her associates, Commager realized, might feel it was necessary. They might know just enough to be afraid of what such knowledge could lead to. If it were possible to encourage a pair of dice to bounce and spin in just the right pattern to win for you, it might, for example, also be possible to send a few buildings bouncing and spinning through a city! Of course, nobody ever seemed to have done it, but that might be due precisely to the existence of some controlling agency, such as the Guides claimed to be.

For a while, Commager regarded the possibility of accepting Paylar's invitation to join her group — and, a few seconds later, he knew he wasn't going to do that either!

However determined he might be to proceed with a painstaking and thorough investigation of this field of possibilities now, there was still a feeling of something completely preposterous about the entire business.

He could accept the fact that

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he had been shaken up mentally to the point where he might qualify without too much difficulty for the nearest insane asylum. But he wasn't ready to admit to anybody just yet that he, a grown man, was taking the matter of psi very seriously.

It was something you could try out for yourself, just as an experiment, behind locked doors and with the windows shaded.

So Commager locked the front door to his cabin and tried it out.

VI

THE TELEGRAM which had been shoved under his apartment door during the night gave a Hollywood telephone number and urgently requested him to call it. It was signed by Elaine Lovelock. So far as Commager could remember, Elaine was no one he knew. When he dialed the number, nobody answered.

He'd try to reach her again before he left for the store, he decided. It was eight-thirty now; he'd just got in from the Bay. The chances were somebody's de luxe fifty-gallon tropical fish tank had started to leak on the living room carpet, and it hadn't occurred to them immediately that this was what pails and pots were for.

He sat down to write a few notes on last night's experiment. Nothing very striking had happened; he suspected he'd simply fallen asleep after the first forty minutes or so. But if he kept notes, something like a recognizable pattern might develop.

Item: The "Lona complex" hadn't bothered him much. It was beginning to feel like something that had happened to somebody else a long time ago. So perhaps the emotions connected with it hadn't been triggered by Paylar's exercises, as Julius seemed to assume. Or else, since he no longer believed in it, it was on its way out as a complex — he hoped.

Item: With his eyes closed, he could imagine very easily that he was looking through the wall of the room into another section of the cabin; also that he had moved there in person, as a form of awareness. In fact, he had roamed happily all around the Bay area for about ten minutes. For the present, that proved only that he had a much more vivid imagination than he'd thought — though whoever created Lona could be assumed to have considerable hidden talent along that line!

Item: When he'd tried to "read" specific pages of a closed book lying on a table near him, he had failed completely.

Item: He had run suddenly — he might have been asleep by

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then — into successive waves of unexplained panic, which brought him upright in his chair with his pulses hammering wildly.

Item: The panic had faded out of reach the instant he began to investigate it and he hadn't been able to recall it.

Item: Either shortly before or after that event, he'd had for a while the sensation of being the target of stealthy and malevolent observation. He had made an attempt to "locate" the observer and gained the impression that the other one unhurriedly withdrew.

Item: Briefly, he'd had a feeling of floating up near the ceiling of the room, watching his own body sitting in the armchair with its eyes closed. This had rocked him hard enough to awaken him again and he had concluded the experiments.

Item: After waking up, he hadn't found or imagined he'd found Ruth MacDonald or anybody else lying around the cabin, murdered or otherwise. He'd checked.

And that about summed it up, Commager decided. Not very positive results, but he was determined to continue the experiments.

He suspected Julius would feel very dubious about all this; but Julius wasn't going to be informed.

He himself was in a remarkably cheerful mood this morning.

MRS. LOVELOCK had a magnificent, musical voice, rather deep for a woman.

"I'm so glad you called again, Mr. Commager," she said. "I was away on an unavoidable errand. Dr. Knox needs to see you immediately! How soon can you be here?"

"Dr. Knox?" Commager repeated. "Do you mean the Reverend Wilson Knox?"

"That is correct. Do you have the address of our Temple?"

Commager said he didn't. There was no immediate reason to add that he hadn't the slightest intention of going there, either. "What did he want to see me about?"

Mrs. Lovelock hesitated. "I couldn't explain it satisfactorily by telephone, Mr. Commager." A trace of anxiety came into her voice. "But it's quite urgent!"

Commager said he was sorry; he had a very full business day ahead of him — which was true — so, unless he could get some indication of what this was all about —

The melodious voice told him quaveringly, "Dr. Knox had a serious heart attack last night. He needs your help!"

Commager scowled. She sounded as off-beat as the rest of them

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and he had an urgent impulse to hang up.

He said instead, "I don't quite see how I could be of much help under those circumstances. I'm not a doctor, you know."

"I do know that, Mr. Commager," Mrs. Lovelock replied. "I also know that you haven't been acquainted with Dr. Knox for more than a few days. But I assure you that you may be saving a human life by coming out here immediately! And that is all I can tell you now —"

She stopped short, sounding as if she were about to burst into tears.

What she said didn't make sense. Also Commager hadn't liked the Reverend Knox, quite aside from the company he kept. But he could, he supposed resignedly, afford to waste a few more hours now.

"What was that address?" he asked, trying not to sound too ungracious about it.

ON THE way over, he had time to wonder whether this mightn't be part of some new little game the Guides wanted to play with him. He was inclined to discount Paylar's threats — psychologically, he suspected, they'd already tried everything they could do to him — and they didn't look like people who would resort readily to physical violence, though Hawkes could be an exception there.

When Commager came in sight of the Temple of Antique Christianity, physical violence suddenly looked a little more likely. He stopped a moment to consider the place.

It was in a back canyon beyond Laurel; the last quarter-mile had been a private road. A tall iron gate blocked the road at this point, opening into a walled court with a small building to the right. A sign over a door in the building indicated that this was the office.

Some distance back, looming over the walls of the court and a few intervening trees, was another structure, an old white building in the Spanish style, the size of a small hotel.

It looked like the right kind of setting for the kind of screwball cult Henry Warbutt had described. Depending on who was around, it also looked like a rather good place for murder or mayhem.

Should he just stroll in carelessly like a big, brave, athletic man? Or should he be a dirty coward and get his revolver out of the glove compartment? It was bound to make an unsightly bulge in any of his jacket pockets —

He decided to be a dirty coward.

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THE GATE was locked, but the lock clicked open a few seconds after Commager pushed a buzzer button beside it. The only visible way into the area was through the office door, so he went inside.

A pallid young man and a dark, intense-looking young woman sat at desks across the room from the door. The young man told Commager he was expected and went to a side door of the office with him, from where he pointed to an entrance into the big building, on the other end of what he called the grove.

"Mrs. Lovelock is waiting for you there," he said and went back to his desk.

The grove had the reflective and well-preserved air of a section of an exclusive cemetery, with just enough trees growing around to justify its name. There was a large, square lawn in the center, and a large, chaste bronze statue stood at each corner of the lawn, gazing upon it.

Back among trees to the left was a flat, raised platform, apparently faced with gray and black marble, but otherwise featureless. Commager had just gone past this when he realized that somebody had been watching him from the top of the platform as he passed.

That, at any rate, was the feeling he got. He hadn't actually seen anyone, and when he looked back, there was nobody there. But the feeling not only had been a definite and certain one — it resumed the instant he started walking on again. This time, he didn't look back.

Before he'd gone a dozen more steps, he knew, too, just when he'd experienced that exact sensation before. It was the previous night, while he was doing his parapsychological experiments at the Bay and had suddenly felt that he was under secret and unfriendly scrutiny.

He laughed at himself, but the impression remained a remarkably vivid one. And before he reached the entrance to the main building which the young man in the office had indicated to him, he had time for the thought that playing with the imagination, as he was doing, might leave one eventually on very shaky ground.

Then he was there, looking into a long hallway, and Mrs. Lovelock's fine, deep voice greeted him before he caught sight of her.

"I'm so glad you could come, Mr. Commager!" she said.

SHE WAS standing in the door of a room that opened on the hall to the left, and Commager was a trifle startled by her appearance. He had expected a large handsome woman of about

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thirty, to match the voice. But Mrs. Lovelock was not only huge; she was shockingly ugly and probably almost twice the age he'd estimated. She wore a white uniform, so Commager asked whether she was Wilson Knox's nurse.

"I've been a registered nurse for nearly forty years, Mr. Commager," the beautiful voice told him. "At present, I'm attending Dr. Knox. Would you come in here, please?"

He followed her into the room and she closed the door behind them. Her big, gray face, Commager decided, looked both worried and very angry.

"The reason I wasn't more open with you over the telephone," she told him, "was that I was certain you wouldn't have taken the trouble to drive out here if I had been. And I couldn't have blamed you! Won't you sit down, please?"

Commager took a chair and said he was afraid he didn't understand.

Mrs. Lovelock nodded. "I shall give you the facts. Dr. Knox had a very severe heart attack at around two o'clock this morning. I have been a member of his congregation for twenty-four years, and I arrived with a doctor shortly afterward. Dr. Knox is resting comfortably now, but he is very anxious to see you. I must let *him* tell you why, Mr. Commager. But I should like to prepare you for what you will hear —"

MRS. LOVELOCK stared gloomily at the carpet for a moment and then her face twisted briefly into a grimace of pure rage.

"Wilson — Dr. Knox — is a harmless old fool!" she told Commager savagely. "This Antique Christianity he worked out never hurt anybody. They prayed to Pan and they had their dances and chants. And there was the Oracle and he read out of the Book of Pan. . ."

"I don't know anything about Dr. Knox's activities," Commager said, not too politely.

She had thick, reddened, capable hands and they were locked together now on her lap, the fingers twisting slowly against one another, as if she were trying to break something between them.

"I was the Oracle, you see," she explained. "I knew it was foolish, but I'd sit up there on the dais in the smoke, with a veil over my head, and I'd say whatever I happened to think of. But this year, Wilson brought in that Ruth MacDonald — you know her, he said."

"I've met the lady," Commager admitted. "I wouldn't say I know her."

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"She became the Oracle! And then she began to change everything! I told Wilson he was quite right to resist that. There are things, Mr. Commager, that a good Christian simply must not do!"

Which, Commager felt, was a remarkable statement, under the circumstances. Mrs. Lovelock came ponderously to her feet.

"Dr. Knox will tell you what remains to be told," she added rather primly. "And, of course, you cannot stay too long. Will you follow me now, please?"

THE REVEREND didn't look as if he were in too bad a condition, Commager thought when he saw him first. He was lying in a hospital bed which had been raised high enough to let him gaze down at the grove out of a window of his second-story room.

After he'd talked a few moments, Commager felt the man was delirious and he thought briefly of calling back Mrs. Lovelock or the other nurse who had been with Wilson Knox when they came in. But those two undoubtedly had been able to judge for themselves whether they should remain with the Reverend or not.

"Why should they want to kill you?" Commager asked. Knox had been speaking of the Guides and then had started to weep; now he blew his nose on a piece of tissue and made a groping motion for Commager's hand, which Commager withdrew in time.

"It was merely a matter of business as far as I was concerned, Mr. Commager. I certainly had no intention of blocking any activities of the Guides. In fact, I should prefer not to know about them. But when Miss MacDonald, who was employed by the Temple, upset our members, I protested to her, sir! Isn't that understandable?"

"Entirely," Commager agreed carefully. "What did Miss MacDonald do to upset them?"

"She predicted two of the congregation would die before the end of the year," Wilson Knox said shakily. "It caused a great deal of alarm. Many of our wealthier clients withdrew from the Temple at once. It is a considerable financial loss!"

The Reverend appeared rational enough on that point. Commager inquired, "Is Miss MacDonald one of the Guides, Dr. Knox?"

"It's not for me to say." Knox gave him a suddenly wary look. "When she spoke to me by telephone last night, I asked whether I had offended anyone. I was, of course, greatly distressed!" His expression changed back to one

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of profound self-pity. "But she repeated only that it had become necessary for me to die this week and hung up."

IT SEEMED an odd way at that for the Temple's new Oracle to have phrased her prediction, Commager thought. He regarded Dr. Knox without much sympathy. "So now you want me to simply tell her not to hurt you, eh?"

"It would be better, Mr. Commager," Knox suggested, "if you addressed yourself directly to the young woman called Paylar!" He reached for his visitor's hand again. "I place myself under your protection, sir! I know you won't refuse it!"

Which was almost precisely what he had said as soon as the nurses left the room, and the reason Commager had believed the patient was in a state of delirium. Now it seemed more probable that he was merely badly mistaken.

Commager decided not to ask why it would be better to speak to Paylar. At any direct question concerning the Guides, the Reverend became evasive. He said instead, "What made you decide I could protect you, Dr. Knox?"

Knox looked downright crafty. "I have made no inquiries about you, sir, and I do not intend to. I am a simple man whose life has been devoted to providing a measure of beauty and solace for his fellow human beings. In a modest way, of course. I have never pried into the Greater Mysteries!"

He seemed to expect approval for that, so Commager nodded gravely.

"I speak only of what I saw," Wilson Knox continued. "On Sunday night, I saw them attempt to bring you directly under their sway. Forgive me for saying, sir, that they do not do this with an ordinary person! I also saw them fail and I knew they were frightened. Nevertheless, you were not destroyed."

He tapped Commager's hand significantly. "That, sir, was enough for me. I do not attempt to pry — I have merely placed myself under your protection!"

VII

A MAN with Secret Powers, a man who could tell the Guides to go jump in the Pacific, might take a passing interest in the gimmicks of an organization like the Temple of Antique Christianity. So on his way out through the grove, Commager had turned aside to get a closer look at the dais.

He assumed, at least, that the gray and black marble platform was what Mrs. Lovelock had re-

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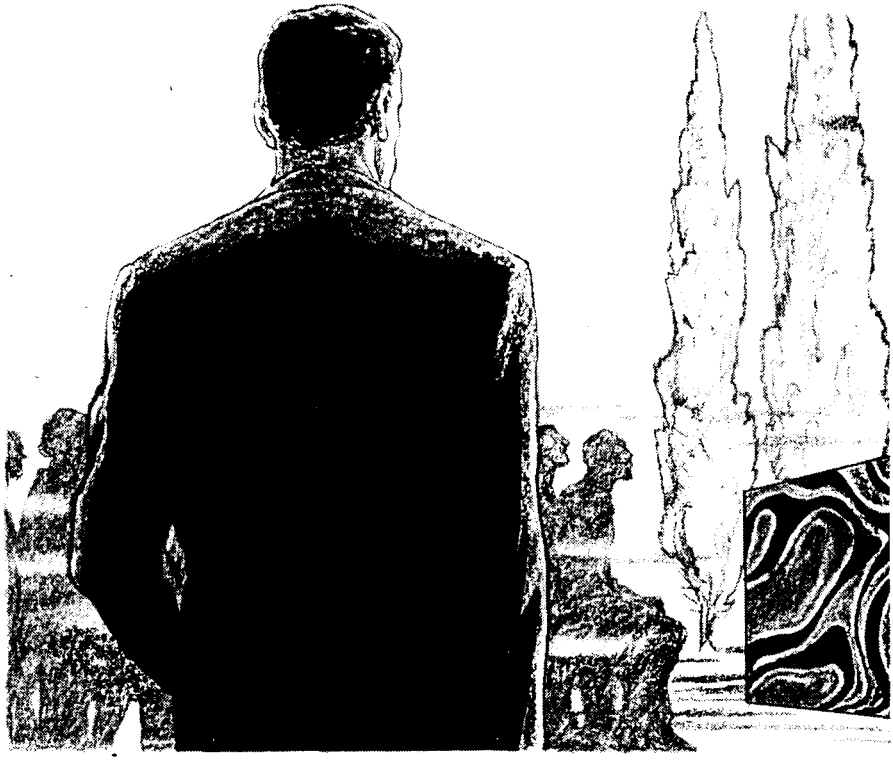
ferred to as the seat of the Oracle, since nothing else around seemed suitable for the purpose.

Standing before it, he pictured her sitting up there in the night, veiled, a vast, featureless bulk, announcing whatever came into her mind in that stunning voice, and he could see that Wilson Knox's congregation might well have listened in pop-eyed fascination. Ruth MacDonald couldn't have been nearly as impressive. Perhaps that was why she had started passing out death sentences.

Down on Sunset, he parked his car at the curb and remained in it, watching the traffic, while he tried to digest the information he had received — if you could call it information.

Wilson Knox and Mrs. Lovelock appeared to be people who had fabricated so much fantastic garbage for the clients of the



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Temple that they had no judgment left to resist the fabrications of others.

Commager's parting from Mrs. Lovelock had given him the impression that the huge woman also was sullenly afraid, though she hid it much better than the Reverend had. It could be simply that she felt her own position in the Temple would be lost if Knox died; but he thought that in her case, too, it was a more personal fear, of the Guides, or even of himself —

And he'd practically promised both of them to put in a word with Paylar to protect that revolting little man!

HOWEVER, the Reverend's heart attack, at least, probably had been a real enough thing. And if Ruth MacDonald actually had telephoned a prediction of death to him earlier

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in the night, there was some cause for intervention. The practice of frightening people into their graves was something that anyone could reasonably insist should be stopped!

And that, of course, brought up the question of how he expected to stop it.

And the question, once more, of just what that odd group of people — who indicated they were the Guides or associated with them — was after.

Ruth MacDonald's activities concerning the Temple of Antique Christianity hardly seemed to lie on the lofty, idealistic level he'd been almost willing to ascribe to them in theory, even if he disliked their methods. She was a brassy, modern young witch, Commager thought, using the old witchcraft tools of fear and suggestion out of equally old motives of material gain and prestige.

But one couldn't account for Hawkes as simply as that, because Hawkes had had money and prestige.

Commager knew least of all about Paylar, except for the young man called Lex Barthold, whose connection with the others wasn't clear. The impression of Paylar was still mainly that she had a physical personality that would be hard to match if you liked them slender, dark and mysterious, and with a self-assurance that wasn't aggressive like Ruth MacDonald's, but that might be a great more difficult to crack. Among the three he'd had to deal with, she seemed to be the leader, though that wasn't necessarily true.

He found himself walking slowly down the street toward a phone booth.

Let's make a game of it, he thought. Assume that what Paylar had said and what the Reverend had suspected was true — at least in the Guides's own opinion — that he had turned out to be exceptionally tough material for their psychological gimmicks. That he had, in fact, abilities he didn't yet know about himself, but which, even in a latent state, were sufficient to have got the Opposition all hot and worried!

EVEN IF the Guides only believed that — if they, like Knox and his mountainous registered nurse, had played around so long on the fringes of reality that they were as badly confused now as the people they'd been misleading — his intervention should still be effective! Particularly if he informed Mrs. Lovelock, with the proper degree of impressiveness, that he'd passed on the word.

A little play-acting didn't seem too much effort to put out to save

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a human life. Even a life like Wilson Knox's . . .

This time, it was Paylar who answered the telephone.

"You've disappointed me a little, Mr. Commager," she said. "When I first heard your voice, I was certain you were going to invite me out to dine and dance."

Commager assured her that this had been his primary purpose — and as soon as he'd said it, he began to wonder whether it wasn't true. But business came first, he added.

"Well, as to the business," Paylar told him demurely, "I'm not necessarily in control of Ruth's activities, you know. I hadn't been informed that the Reverend Knox was ill." She paused a moment. "I'll tell Ruth she isn't to frighten your friend again. Will that be satisfactory, Mr. Commager?"

"Why, yes, it is," Commager said and found himself flushing. Somehow, in her easy acceptance of his intervention, she'd managed to make him feel like a child whose fanciful notions were being humored by an adult. He put the idea aside, to be investigated later. "Now about where to have dinner —"

Paylar said she'd prefer to let him surprise her. "But I have a condition," she added pleasantly. "There'll be no shop-talk tonight!"

Putting him on the defensive again, Commager thought ruefully. He told her shop-talk had been far from his mind and would eight o'clock be about right?

It would be about right, she agreed. And then, arriving at the store finally, some fifteen minutes later, he found Jean Bohart waiting in his office.

"Hi, Alan," she greeted him gloomily. "You're taking me to lunch. Okay?"

In one way and another, Commager felt, Tuesday simply didn't look like a good day for business.

"I'M IN A mood today," Jean announced. She picked without enthusiasm at a grapefruit and watercress salad. "But you're not talking to me, either!"

"I was thinking," Commager said, "that I was glad you didn't look like a certain lady I met this morning. What's the mood about?"

She hesitated. "I'm making my mind up about something. I'll tell you tomorrow. Who was the lady? Someone I know?"

"I doubt it. A Mrs. Lovelock."

"I don't know any Lovelocks. What's the matter with her looks?"

"Fat," Commager explained.

"Well," Jean said glumly, "I'm not that."

She was, in fact, in spite of her downcast expression, a model

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of crisp attractiveness as usual. A white sharkskin suit, with a lavender veil gathered lightly at her throat, plus a trim white hat to one side of a blonde head — neat, alert and healthy-looking as an airline hostess, Commager thought approvingly.

Jean mightn't care for the comparison, though, so he didn't tell her. And he wasn't going to press her about the mood. At the rare moments that she became reserved, probing made her sullen. Probably something to do with Ira again.

"I called off the Taylors for tomorrow," she told him suddenly, with some traces of embarrassment, "so we could talk. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not," Commager said hesitantly. Then it struck him suddenly: they'd had a date for an all-day fishing party Wednesday, Jean and he and the Taylor couple. He'd forgotten completely!

"That's all right then," Jean said, looking down at her plate. She still seemed curiously shy and Commager realized that this was no ordinary problem. "Will you sleep at your cabin tonight?"

"Sure," he said, concerned — he was very fond of Jean. His sleeping at the cabin was the usual arrangement on such occasions; he'd have everything ready there for the day before anyone else arrived and then they'd be off to an early start.

"I'll be there tomorrow at eight," said Jean. She gave him a quick, unhappy smile. "I love you, Alan — you never ask questions when you shouldn't!"

SO HE HAD two dates at eight now, twelve hours apart. If it hadn't been for the attendant problems, Commager decided, his social life might have looked exceptionally well-rounded at the moment to almost anybody!

But he didn't seem to be doing a very good job of keeping clear of attendant problems. It had struck him for the first time, while they were lunching, that Jean Bohart might easily have been the prototype of the figment of Lona. There were obvious general similarities, and the dissimilarities might have been his own expression of the real-life fact that Jean was Ira's wife.

But he felt himself moving into a mentally foggy area at that point. There had been occasional light love-making between them, too light to really count; but Jean certainly had remained emotionally absorbed with Ira, though she tended to regard him superficially with a kind of fond exasperation.

Commager didn't really know how he felt about Jean, except that he liked her more than any-

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one else he could think of. There was a warning awareness that if he tried to push any deeper into that particular fog right now, he might get himself emotionally snagged again.

It didn't seem advisable to become emotionally snagged. There were still too many other doubtful issues floating around.

One of the other issues resolved itself — in a way — very shortly, with the ringing of the office telephone.

It was Elaine Lovelock once more.

"Mr. Commager," she said, "about the matter we were discussing —"

He began to tell her he had spoken to Paylar, but she interrupted him: "Dr. Knox died an hour ago!"

— JAMES H. SCHMITZ

CONCLUDED NEXT MONTH

BIG NEWS

You've wished *Galaxy* would come out earlier? Well it's going to! Your next issue of *Galaxy* will go on sale at your newsstand November 22nd, and be mailed to subscribers November 7th. It will be cover dated January but will be your Christmas issue — with another heartening cover by EMSH (Featuring *Galaxy's* famous 4 armed Santa Claus, of course). In order to do this, there will be no issue dated December, but no issue will be skipped. If you are a subscriber you will still get your same number of issues. We feel certain you'll like this earlier on sale date.

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By BILL CLOTHIER

THE SEMANTIC WAR

Illustrated by WES

Perhaps there have been causes for slaughter just as silly as this was — but try to find one!

THE RAIN pours down chill out of a sullen sky.

My pace quickens as I try to regain the relative warmth and shelter of the cavern before I become thoroughly drenched. I cannot afford to catch a cold. All alone as I am and with no medicine, I would stand too great a chance of a quick death. These lowering Oregon skies still hold traces of nameless disease in their writhing cloud tendrils. I am not just afraid of a cold. That would only be the key for some other malady to use and strike me down forever.

I see the cave up ahead and feel a sense of contentment as I draw near and then duck inside its stony mouth. The rain hisses without, but inside it is dry. There is a heavy cow-hide hanging on a peg in the wall and I take it down and wrap it around me. Soon I will be warm. Once more

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I may stave off my ultimate end.

Sometimes I wonder why I wish to put it off. Certainly, according to my old standards, there is no point in living. But somehow I feel that the mere fact of living is justification in itself. Even for such a life as mine.

I didn't always feel this way. But then circumstances change and people change with them. I changed my circumstances more than myself, but I had no alternative. So now I exist.

I suppose I should be content. After all, I am alive and, in my own simple way, I enjoy life. I can remember people who asked nothing more than to be allowed to live — to exist. Ironically enough, I always considered them sub-normal. I felt that a man should strive to do something that would not only perpetuate the happiness of his own life but that of his fellow-men. Something that would make life more beautiful, and easier, and more kind.

IT WAS with this feeling that I applied myself as a student of philosophy at Stanford University. And the strengthening of this same belief led me to take up teaching and embrace it as the only way of obtaining genuine happiness. My personal philosophy was simple. I would learn about life in all its real and symbolic meanings and then teach it to my pupils, each of whom, I felt sure, were thirsting for the knowledge that I was extracting from my cultural environment. I would show them the meaning behind things. That, I felt, was the key to successful living.

Now it seems strangely pathetic that I should have essayed such an impossible task. But even a professor of philosophy can be mistaken and become confused.

I remember when I first became aware of the movement. For years, we had been drilling certain precepts into the soft, impressionable heads of those students who came under our influence. Liberalism, some called it, the right to take the values accumulated by society over a period of hundreds of years and bend them to fit whatever idea or act was contemplated. By such methods, it was possible to fit the mores to the deed, not the deed to the mores. Oh, it was a wonderful theory, one that promised to project all human activities entirely beyond good and evil.

However, I digress. It was a spring morning at Berkeley, California, when I had my first inkling of the movement. I was sitting in my office gazing out the window and considering life in my usual contemplative fash-

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ion. I might say I was being rather smug. I was thinking how fortunate I was to have been graduated from Stanford with such high honors, and how my good luck had stayed with me until I received my doctor's degree in a famous Eastern university and came out to take an associate professorship at the Berkeley campus.

I was watching the hurrying figures below on the crosswalks and idly noting the brilliant green of the shrubbery and the trees and the lawn. I was mixing up Keats with a bit of philosophy and thoroughly enjoying myself. Knowledge is truth, truth beauty, I mused, that is all we know on Earth, and all we need to know.

There was a knock on my door and I said come in, reluctantly abandoning my train of thought which had just picked up Shakespeare, whom I was going to consider as two-thirds philosopher and one-third poet. I have never felt that the field of literature had the sole claim to Shakespeare's greatness.

PROFESSOR Lillick came in, visibly perturbed. Lillick was a somewhat erratic individual (for a professor, at least) and he was often perturbed. Once he became excited about the possibilities of the campus shrubbery being stunted and discolored by the actions of certain dogs living on campus. He was not a philosophy professor, of course, but a member of the political science group.

"Carlson," he asked nervously, "have you heard about it yet?"

"I have no idea," I returned good-naturedly. "Heard about what?"

He looked behind him as if he thought he might be followed. Then he whirled around, his sharp-featured face alight with feeling. "Carlson — the Wistick dufels the Moraddy!" And he stared at me intently, his gimlet eyes almost blazing.

I stared back at him blankly.

"You haven't heard!" he exclaimed. "I thought surely you would know about it. You're always talking about freedom to apply thought for the good of humanity. Well, we're finally going to do something about it. You'll see. Keep your ears open, Carlson." Then he turned and started out of the room. He paused at the threshold and fixed me again with his ferretlike eyes. "The Wistick dufels the Moraddy!" he said, and vanished through the door.

And that was my first unheeded omen of what was to come. I paid little attention to it. Lillick wasn't the sort of man who inspired attention. As a matter of fact, I considered reporting him

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to the head of his department as being on the verge of a nervous breakdown. But I didn't. In those days, nervous breakdowns were a common occurrence around college campuses. The educational profession was a very hazardous occupation. One Southern university, for example, reported five faculty suicides during spring quarter.

IN THE days that followed, however, I began to realize that there was some sort of movement being fostered by the student body. It couldn't be defined, but it could be felt and seen. The students began to form groups and hold meetings — often without official sanction. What they were about could not be discovered, but some of the results soon became evident.

For one thing, certain students began to walk on one side of the street and the other students walked on the other side. The ones who used the north side of the street wore green sweaters with white trousers or skirts, and the south-side students wore white sweaters with green trousers or skirts. It even got to the point where those in green sweaters went only to classes in the morning and those in white attended the afternoon sessions.

Then the little white cards began to appear. They were sent through the mail. They were slipped under doorways and in desk drawers. They turned up beside your plate at dinner and under your pillow at night. They were pasted on your front door in the morning and they appeared in the fly-leaves of your books. They were even hung on trees like fruit, and surely no fruit ever spored so queer a seedling.

They said either one thing or the other: THE WISTICK DUFELS THE MORADDY, or THE MORADDY DUFELS THE WISTICK. Which card belonged to what group was not immediately clear. It was not until the riots broke out that the thing began to be seen in its proper perspective. And then it was too late.

When the first riot started, it was assumed that the university officials and the police could quell it in a very short time. But strangely enough, as additional police were called in, the battle raged even more fiercely. I could see part of the affair from my window and therefore was able to understand why the increasing police force only added to the turmoil. They were fighting one another! And through the din could be heard the wild shouts of "The Wistick dufels the Moraddy!" or "The Moraddy dufels the Wistick!"

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The final blow came when I saw the Registrar and the Dean of Men struggling fiercely in one of the hedge-rows, and heard the Dean of Men yell in wild exultation as he brought a briefcase down on the Registrar's head, "The Wistick dufels the Moraddy!"

Then someone broke in through the door of my office. I turned in alarm and saw a huge three-letter man standing only a few feet from me. He had been in one of my classes. I remembered something about his being the hardest driving fullback on the Pacific coast. He was certainly the dumbest philosophy student I ever flunked. His hair was mussed and he was wild-eyed. He had blood on his face and chest, and his clothes were torn and grass-stained.

"The Wistick dufels the Moraddy," he said.

"Get out of my office," I told him coldly, "and stay out."

"So you're on the other side," he snarled. "I hoped you would be."

He started toward me and I seized a bookend on my desk and tried to strike him with it. But he brushed it aside and came on in. His first blow nearly broke my arm and as I dropped my guard due to the numbing pain, he struck me solidly on the side of the jaw.

When I recovered consciousness, I was lying by the side of my desk where I had fallen. My head ached and my neck was stiff. I got painfully to my feet and then noticed the big square of cardboard pinned to the door of my office. It was lettered in red pencil and in past tense said, "The Wistick dufelled the Moraddy."

THE UPRISINGS arose spontaneously in all parts of the country. They were not confined to colleges. They were not confined to any particular group. They encompassed nearly the entire population and the fervor aroused by their battle-cry, whichever one it might be, was beyond all comprehension.

I could not understand either slogan's meaning — and there were others like myself. On several occasions, I attempted to find out, but I was beaten twice and threatened with a pistol the third time, so I gave up all such efforts. I was never much given to any sort of physical violence.

One night, I went home thoroughly disheartened by the state of affairs. The university was hardly functioning. Nearly the entire faculty, including the college president, had been drawn into one camp or the other. Their actions were utterly abhorrent to me. If the professor was a green-

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top, or Wistickian, he lectured only to green-tops. If he belonged to the Moraddians, or white-top faction, they were the only ones who could enter his classroom.

The two groups were so evenly divided that open violence was frowned upon as a means of attaining whatever end they had in view. They were biding their time and gathering strength for fresh onslaughts on each other.

As I say, I went home feeling very discouraged. My wife was in the kitchen preparing dinner, and I went in and sat down at the table while she worked. The daily paper was lying on the table, its headlines loaded with stories of bloodshed and strife throughout the nation. I glanced through them. Lately, there seemed to be a sort of pattern forming.

East of the Mississippi, the general slogan was emerging as the Moraddy dufelling the Wistick. West of the Mississippi, the Wistick was receiving the greater support. And it seemed that the younger people and the women preferred the Moraddy, while elderly people and most men were on the side of the Wistick.

I commented on this.

My wife answered briefly, "Of course. Anyone should know that the Moraddy will win out." She went on with the preparations for dinner, not looking at me.

I sat stunned for a moment. Great God in Heaven, not my wife!

"Am I to understand that you are taking any part of this seriously?" I asked with some heat. "The whole thing is a horrible, pointless prank!"

She turned and faced me squarely. "Not to me. I say the Moraddy will win out. I want it to — and I think you'd be wise to get on the bandwagon while there's still time."

I realized she was serious. Dead serious. I tried a cautious query:

"Just what does the dufellation of the Wistick by the Moraddy mean?"

AND IT made her angry. It actually made her angry! She switched off the front burner and walked past me into the living room. I didn't think she was going to answer, but she did — sort of.

"There is no excuse for an egghead in your position not knowing what it means." Her voice was strained and tense. "If you had any perception whatever, you would understand what the Moraddy has to give the American people. It's our only hope. And you've got to take sides. You're either for the Moraddy or the Wistick — you can't take the middle way."

I felt completely isolated.

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"Wait! I don't know what it means —"

"Forget it," she broke in. "I should have known. You were born, you have lived, and you will die an egghead in an ivory tower. Just remember — the Moraddy dufels the Wistick!" And she swept on upstairs to pack. And out of my life.

And that's the way it was. Whatever malignant poison had seeped into the collective brain of the nation, it was certainly a devastating leveler of all sorts of institutions and values. Wives left husbands and husbands left wives. Joint bank accounts vanished. Families disintegrated. Wall street crumpled.

Developments were swift and ominous. The Army split up into various groups. Most of the enlisted men favored the Moraddy, but the officers and older noncoms pledged the Wistickian faith. Their power was sufficient to hold many in line, but a considerable number in the lower ranks deserted and joined forces with the Moraddians, who held the eastern half of the country.

The Wisticks ruled the western half with an iron hand, and all signs pointed toward civil war. Labor and military authorities conscripted the entire population regardless of age, sex or religious convictions.

For my own part, I slipped away from the campus and fled north into the Oregon mountains. It was not that I was afraid to fight, but I rebelled at the absolute stupidity of the whole thing. The idea — fighting because of a few words!

But they did.

The destruction was frightful. However, it was not as bad as many had thought it would be. The forces of the Wistick leveled the city of New York, true, but it took three H-bombs to do the job, instead of one, as the Air Force had claimed. In retaliation, San Francisco and Los Angeles were destroyed in a single night by cleverly placed atom bombs smuggled in by a number of fifth-columnist wives who gained access to the cities under the pretext of returning to their husbands. This was a great victory for the Moraddians, even though the women had to blow themselves up to accomplish their mission.

The Moraddian forces were slowly beaten back toward the Atlantic shores. They were very cunning fighters and they had youthful courage to implement that cunning. But their overall policy lacked the stability and long-range thinking necessary to the prosecution of total war. One day they might overrun many populous areas and the next day, due to the constant bickering and

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quarreling among their own armies, they would lose all they had won, and more, too.

Finally, in desperation, they loosed their most horrible weapon, germ warfare. But they forgot to protect themselves against their own malignity. The Semantic War ground to a shuddering halt. The carrion smell of death lay round the world.

The dufellation of the Wistick and the Moraddy.

SO HERE I am, scuttling around in the forests like a lonely pack-rat. It is not the sort of life I would choose if there were any other choice. Yet life has become very simple.

I enjoy the simple things and I enjoy them with gusto. When I find food that suits my stomach, I am happy. When I quench my thirst, I am happy. When I see a beautiful sunset from one of my mountain crags, I am happy. It takes little when you have little, and there have been few men who have had less.

Only one thing troubles me. I suppose it doesn't matter, but I go on wondering.

I wonder which side was right. I mean *really* right.

— BILL CLOTHIER

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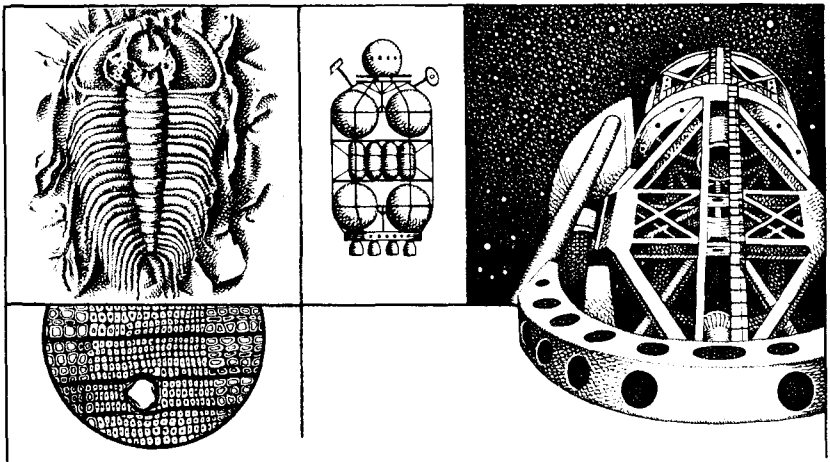

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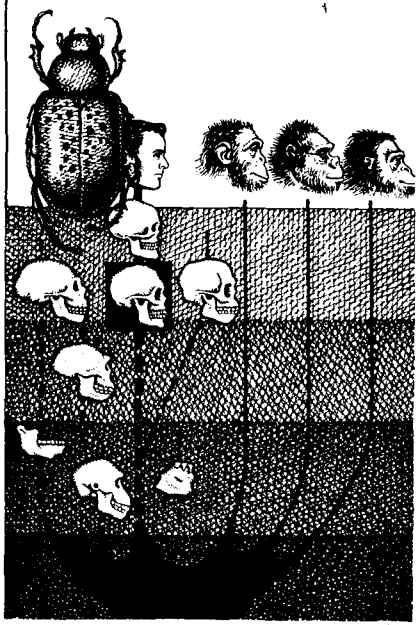

IT WAS DURING the year 1609 that Galileo Galilei of Pisa, then Professor of Mathematics at Padua, learned about the invention of a Dutchman involving optical lenses, which enabled its user to see distant things as if they were nearby. A small amount of experimentation sufficed to reproduce the instrument which had not yet been named "telescope" — Galilei himself referred to it as the *occhiale* when writing Italian and the *perspicillum* when

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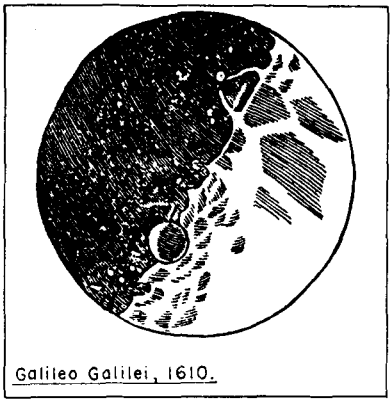

One of the earliest drawings of the moon.

writing Latin.

Within a few months, he had made quite a number of revolutionary astronomical discoveries. He saw mountains on the Moon. He observed that Venus shows phases, just as the Moon does. He "resolved" the Milky Way into countless stars. He saw dark spots on the Sun. He discovered the four largest moons of Jupiter. He noticed that there was something strange about the shape of Saturn. And he wrote it all down in his *Sidereal Messenger,* which appeared in 1610.

Everything Galilei saw with his new instrument can be seen with a reasonably good pair of binoculars or with a pocket telescope. In fact, my own 10-power pocket telescope — actually a target 'scope from a tank gun — is superior in many respects to Galilei's *occhiale,* even discounting its much smaller size. The interesting point is that so many of the astronomical facts discovered by Galilei are almost, but only *almost,* visible with the naked eye.

I don't know whether it is true that a very few people are able to see the four large satellites of Jupiter without any optical aid, as Jules Verne stated in one of his stories. But it is true that some of the major lunar features can be recognized *after* you have studied a good large photograph of the Moon. You could never draw them from naked eye observation, but once you have "learned" them, you can look for them with some success. Likewise the phases of Venus are very close to naked-eye visibility, but only close. To really see them needs a few magnifications.

Lunar map by J. Keill, first published in 1718.

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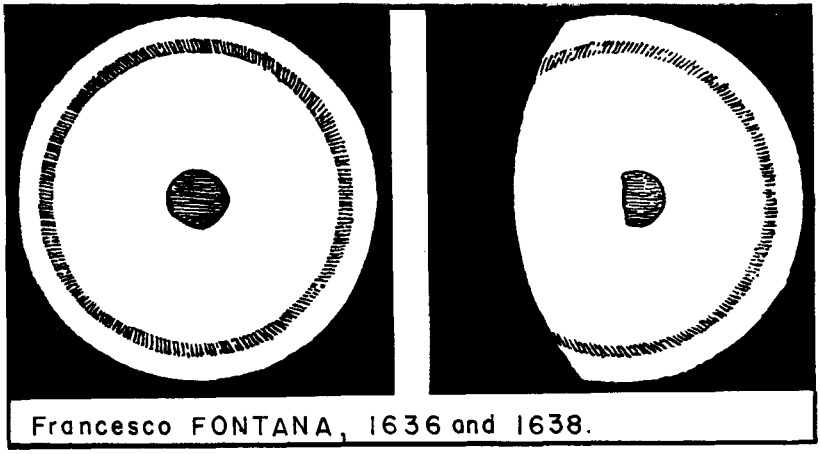

The first drawings of Mars by Fontana.

WELL, AS soon as there was a telescope, however primitive it may appear in retrospect, it was possible to see and to draw those things, and the planets sat for their first portraits, beginning with the Moon. Figure 1 shows a drawing of the Moon by Galilei himself. It may not be the very first telescopic drawing of the Moon made — Galilei probably made several and published only the best — but it certainly is one of the earliest.

The round object visible directly on the terminator is indubitably the *Mare serenitatis,* while the white spot with the two white lines going to (or from) it is certainly the crater we now call Tycho. The roughly triangular shadow on the bright half near Tycho is probably meant to be the *Mare humorum* and the irregularities below the *Mare serenitatis* may be the *Mare frigoris,* dimly seen.

Compared to Galilei's sketch, the lunar map drawn by the Scotsman John Keill just a century later looks virtually modern (Fig. 2). It was printed in Oxford in 1718 in a book entitled *Introductio ad veram Astronomiam;* all the *Mare* plains are recognizably drawn and many of the more conspicuous craters are entered, even with indications of their systems of "rays."

Moving on to the planets, Fig. 3 shows the first drawings of Mars made by Francesco Fontana in 1636 and 1638. Since Mars moves around the Sun out-

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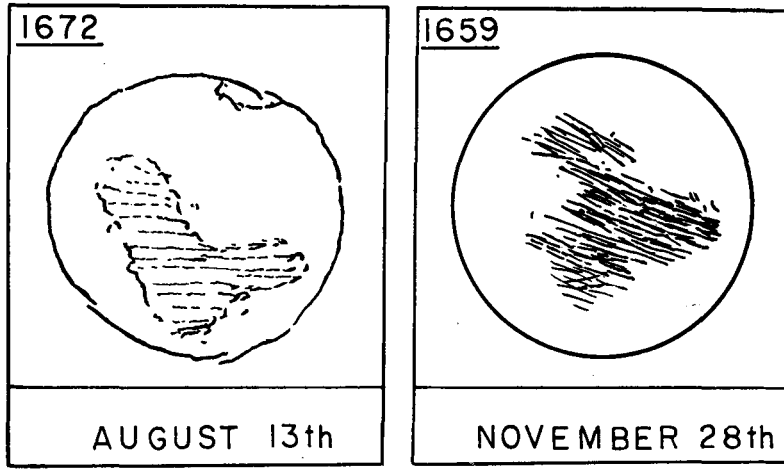

Two drawings of Mars by Christian Huyghens.

side the orbit of Earth, it can never show phases like Venus. Only a small portion of the night side of Mars could be seen from Earth when the relative positions are favorable. Since there is nothing luminous on the portion of the Martian globe that happens to have night, it simply disappears from view. Fontana, in one of his drawings, caught this maximum phase that Mars can show.

But the dark portion in the center and the dark rim near the edge of the disk does not correspond to anything known, indicating that Fontana's telescope must have been rather imperfect. The two drawings of Mars made by Christian Huyghens only a few decades later are much better. The darkish triangular area is probably meant to be the one now called *Syrtis major* and one of the two drawings shows a rather clear indication of the south polar cap of Mars (Fig. 4).

But Mars is a difficult object even now, just because most of its markings are so faint. Moreover, Mars can be seen well only when it comes close to Earth, roughly every two years and two months. Giant Jupiter is a far better object.

It is bigger, to begin with, and it is so far distant from the Earth at any time that it does not make too much difference whether both planets are in neighboring sectors of their orbits as seen from the Sun. Even the earliest drawings

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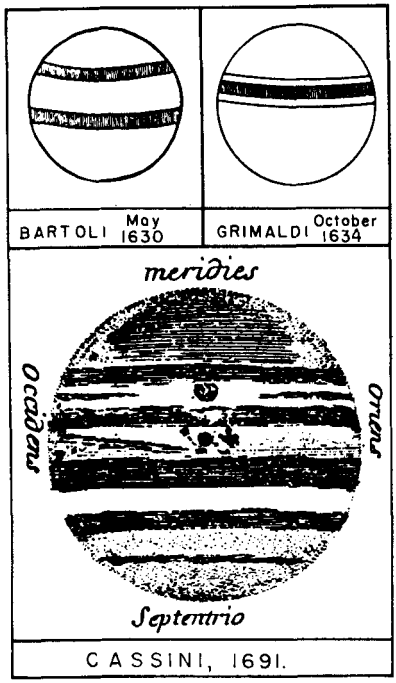
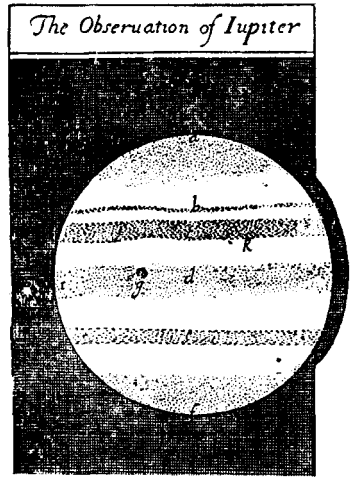


Three typical drawings of Jupiter made by various observers of the 17th century.

of Jupiter by Bartoli, Grimaldi, Cassini and Hooke (Fig. 5 and 6) can be recognized at a glance for what they are supposed to be.

JEAN DOMINIQUE Cassini's drawing is not only one of the early drawings of Jupiter; it is also the first to show the feature which later became famous as the Red Spot. That Red Spot — it isn't always red incidently; it has been seen as orange, yellow, lavender and plain gray — was greeted as a great novelty when it became faintly visible in 1872. Eight years later, in 1880, it was most pronounced and of a particularly vivid color.

Speculation ran high then. Some astronomers thought they were lucky enough to actually observe the birth of still another moon of Jupiter. Remember that in 1880 it was still generally believed that the satellites of the planets had been produced by their primaries by flinging portions of their own masses into space. Maybe here was a lucky chance to observe this very process.



Jupiter as drawn by Hook on June 26, 1666.

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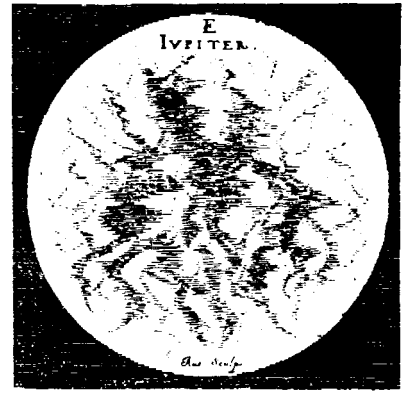
Other astronomers believed, however, that they were seeing just the opposite — not the birth of a new moon, but the funeral of an old moon or at least a potential moon. They thought that one of the asteroids, pulled out of its belt by Jupiter's gravitational might, had crashed and that the Red Spot was the reflection of enormous lava flows caused by the impact.

In the middle of the spirited debate, somebody discovered an older drawing of Jupiter which showed the Spot, although it was very faint and not labeled "red." And then, knowing what to look for, it was traced farther back, the trail ending with Cassini's picture. In short, the Spot has been there for centuries, being sometimes well defined and sometimes not — and we still don't know what it is.

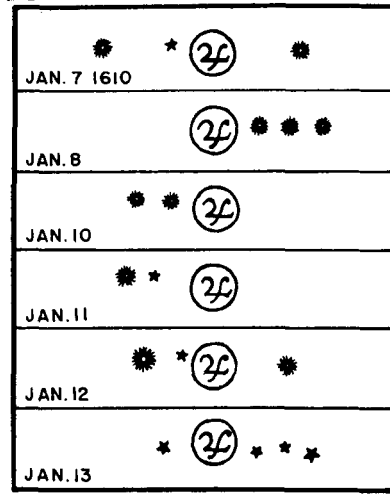
A strange case, to my mind, is presented by Fig. 7. The drawing was made by Johannes Hevelius (real name : Hewelcke) of Danzig who built himself an observatory in 1641 and who is usually mentioned with much praise for his observations of the Moon and his improved star catalogue. The lunar maps of Hevelius constituted progress, but his drawing of Jupiter is practically meaningless. If it did not have the name of the planet engraved on it, one might think it an early attempt at



Hevelius' drawing of Jupiter.

drawing the faint markings of the daylight side of Mercury or perhaps the disk of Venus.

By the time Hevelius built his observatory, it was known to



Galileo Galilei's observations of Jupiter in January 1610, proving the existence of the four large moons.

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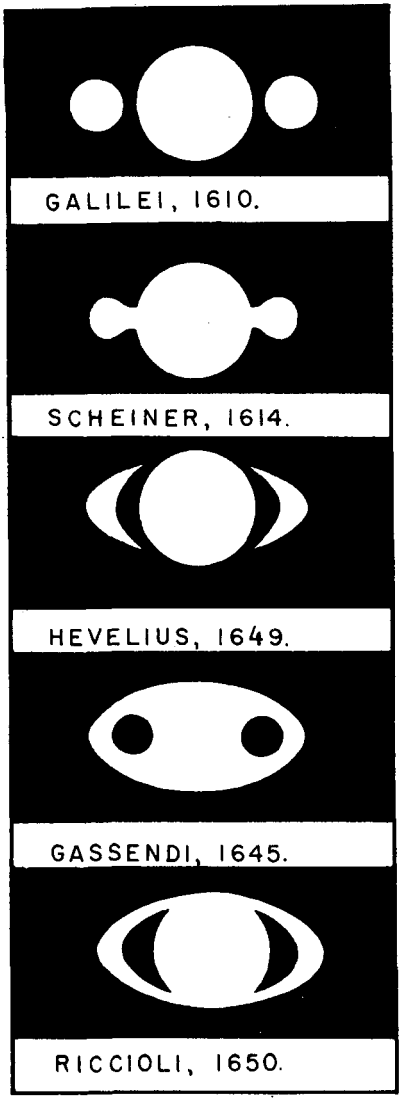

Five drawings of Saturn from 1610-1650.

everybody interested in astronomy that Jupiter had four large moons. They are so easily visible with any telescope of any kind that Galilei must have seen them the very first time he pointed his *occhiale* at Jupiter. But at first he may have thought that he just saw a few stars which happened to lie in the direction of Jupiter.

To be sure they were satellites, one had to establish that they move around the planet and in January, 1610, Galilei watched for this particular phenomenon. The drawings reproduced as Fig. 8 were the result. Of course Galilei just marked their positions, but even so, they are the first drawing of satellites of another planet.

WHEN IT came to Saturn, something new entered the picture. Every schoolboy — and quite a number of the fathers of schoolboys — knows nowadays that Saturn has rings. And knowing that Saturn has rings and having seen drawings of the rings of Saturn, everybody can "see" them at once when given access to a telescope. But the early telescopes were small and weak. In addition, nobody had ever even guessed that a planet may have rings.

There was nothing else in nature which compared with what

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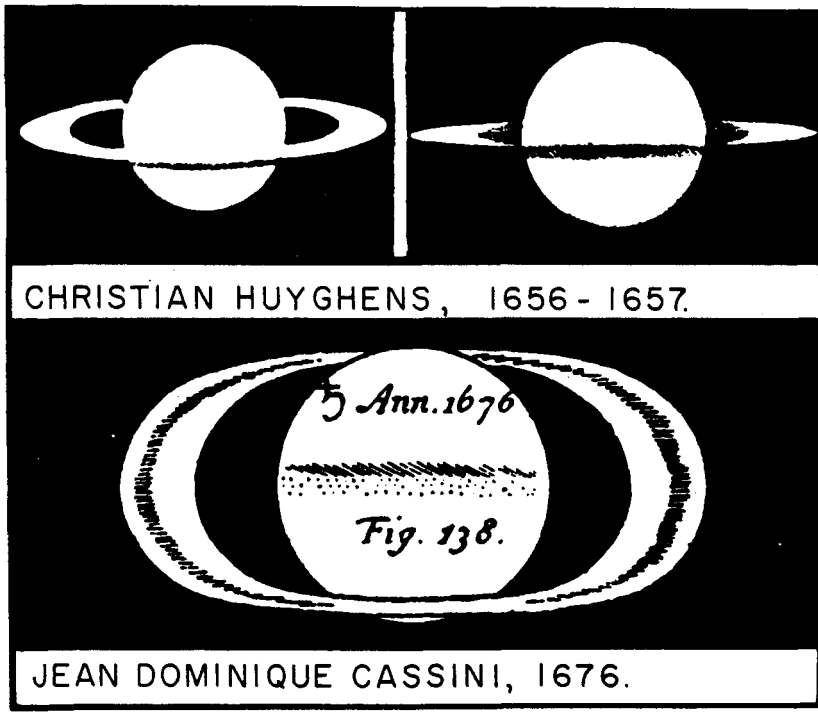

Saturn as drawn by Huyghens and Cassini, the latter being the first to show Cassini's Division."

the telescope showed, wavering because of the constant movement of the atmosphere and with beautiful-looking but annoying rainbow fringes. To add to these difficulties, the planet itself appeared much smaller than Jupiter. We now know that it actually is somewhat smaller than Jupiter, but the main reason for the apparent smallness was simply its greater distance, for the orbit of Saturn is 400 million miles beyond Jupiter's.

Galilei's impression of this difficult planet was that it might be a triple planet (see Fig. 9, top drawing) while, to Christopher Scheiner, it looked as if the two smaller spheres were attached to the main body. To Pierre Gassendi, it appeared rather as having the general shape of a football with two large dark holes in it.

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Johannes Hevelius saw and drew the appearance fairly correctly, but was at a loss to explain what he saw.

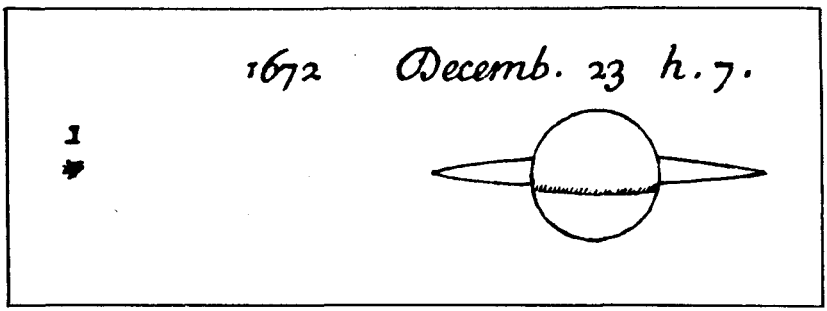
The drawing made by Giovanni Battista Riccioli (Fig. 9, bottom drawing) also looks quite correct to us, though it seems that Riccioli believed that the two "handles" were somehow attached to the planet's body.

It is somewhat strange that none of these early astronomers who strained their eyes to understand the mysterious shape of Saturn noticed Saturn's satellite, Titan. Though pretty far away, it is, after all, not only Saturn's largest satellite, but by far the largest one in the whole Solar System, surpassing Mercury, the smallest of the planets, by more than 500 miles in diameter. Mercury's diameter is almost exactly 3000 miles, while that of Titan is around 3550 miles.

The man who finally did discover Titan also solved the problem of the "appendages" of Saturn. He was the Dutchman Christian Huyghens, who lived at The Hague and who built himself a telescope which could magnify up to 100 times. It was not a large telescope, for it had an aperture of only 2-1/3 inches, with a focal length of 23 feet.

HUYGHENS discovered Titan in 1655 and, during the following year, he realized that the appendages were actually a flat ring around the planet, not touching it at any point (Fig. 10, top). Knowing that it was a flat and unattached ring did not reveal anything about its nature, of course, but just then the time approached that was favorable for discovering a little more detail.

The ring always maintains the



Cassini's drawing marking the discovery of Saturn's moon Rhea on December 23rd 1672.

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same "attitude" in space, and as Saturn and Earth are moving around the Sun, we see the ring more or less "open" depending on the mutual positions. It can and does happen that we see the ring edge on. Since it is quite thin, it simply disappears from view in that position, except for observers with very powerful telescopes.

The other possible extreme is that we can see even the farther rim of the ring raised a bit above the rim of the sphere of the planet itself — Riccioli caught this position in his drawing. When Huyghens made his discovery, the ring presented itself in an intermediate aspect, but in the following years it "opened up" some more.

The first observers to notice a detail on the ring were the brothers Ball in Minehead, England, who reported that they had seen, in the late evening of October 13, 1665, that the ring showed a black line. But apparently no conclusions were drawn and the statement itself was more or less forgotten.

In 1668, Jean Dominique Cassini, following an invitation by Louis XIV of France, gave up his professorship at Bologna and moved to Paris. And just ten years after the announcement of the black line by the brothers Ball, Cassini saw it very clearly himself and continued to watch for it to see whether it was a permanent marking. In 1676, he made a drawing which he published (Fig. 10, bottom) and the main gap has been referred to as "Cassini's Division" ever since, and the "ring" became "rings."

Because Cassini watched Saturn so carefully for the sake of the black line on or in the ring, it was very nearly inevitable that he should also discover some of the other moons of Saturn. Both Japetus and Rhea are large, with a diameter of around 1000 miles each, and Cassini discovered both of them: Japetus in 1671 and Rhea in 1672 (Fig. 11). In 1684, he found two more: Tethys and Dione.

We've come a long way since those first portraits of major discoveries in the Solar System — but we couldn't have done it without them and similar patient observations. Unlike old family pictures, they aren't a bit laughable.

The real miracle is that so much was learned with so little in the way of equipment.

ANY QUESTIONS?

Would you please tell me what the Doppler effect is?

Mike Davenport
8014 Broadleaf Avenue
Van Nuys, Calif.

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The Doppler effect is named after Christian Johann Doppler, an Austrian physicist who died in 1853. He did not "discover" it in the customary sense of the word; he reasoned that it had to exist. Experimental proof was later established by others.

To understand the principle, imagine that you have a gadget which sends out 1000 separate impulses per second, such as 1000 very short bursts of radio waves. If you move rapidly away from this gadget, you will receive less than 1000 impulses per second. If you approach it rapidly, you'll receive more than 1000 impulses per second.

A sound is actually a succession of such impulses, the sound waves. If you approach the source of the sound rapidly, you'll "receive" more of them per second, which sounds like a higher note. Moving away from the sound source produces a lower note.

Experimentally, this can be shown quite easily by driving past an electric bell. At the instant you pass it, it seems to acquire a lower pitch. The whistle of a train passing the observer seems to undergo the same change.

Doppler predicted this effect in 1842 and it was proved experimentally for sound waves for the first time by Buys-Ballot in 1845. Proof that light waves produce the Doppler effect was first given by Fizeau in 1848.

The Doppler effect is very useful for establishing the velocities of bodies receding from or approaching the observer along the line of sight.

Recently I was told by a friend that there may be some giant sloths still living. What is the case for this?

Frank E. Goodwyn
9709 Lorain Avenue
Silver Springs, Md.

The somewhat paradoxical answer is that there is no case for living giant sloths right now, but that some zoologists once thought they had one.

It was during the early decades of the 19th century that the giant sloth became known — as a fossil, naturally. The great problem then was just when it had lived and, more specifically, whether primitive Man in America and the giant sloth had ever met. When evidence for contemporary existence of giant sloth and Man in South America was found, another discovery came to light.

Almost at the southern end of the South American continent, there is an inlet which was named Ultima Esperanza, and a retired German sea captain

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by the name of Eberhard built himself a ranch there. Somewhere on that ranch was the skin of a large animal and when a piece of the skin came into the hands of a professional zoologist, it turned out to be the skin of a giant sloth.

It was then that Professor Florentino Ameghino of Argentina announced that the giant sloth probably was not extinct, but had merely grown very rare. He quoted the experience of one Ramón Lista who told of having been startled by a large unknown animal one night while camping in the interior.

Since the genus of giant sloth Ameghino expected to be surviving was *Mylodon*, he coined the name of *Neomylodon listai* for the living species.

A search of early descriptions of South American animals also yielded several suspicious passages. Ameghino said that the native languages contained a name for an animal which could only be *Neomylodon*. The result of all this was that a British newspaper organized an expedition.

The expedition return empty-handed and some later newspaper accounts may not be entirely truthful.

With modern methods like radio-carbon dating, it would be possible to establish the true age of that skin, but I don't believe that this has been done. However, various remains of giant sloth from Texas have been so dated; the figures ran to ages of from 8,000 to 12,000 years. This confirms the other evidence that early American Man and giant sloth met.

That the interior of South America may still harbor survivors cannot be categorically denied. But there is no proof, either.

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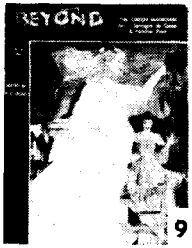

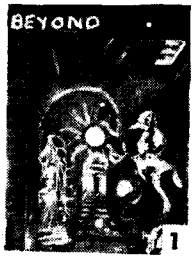

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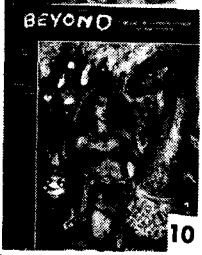

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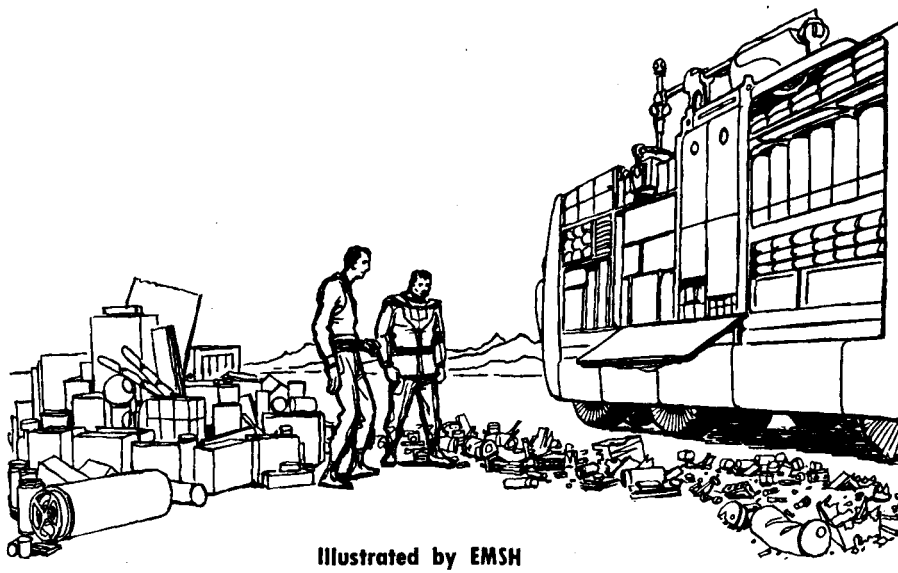
AUTOFAC

By PHILIP K. DICK

Naturally, Man should want to stand on his own two feet . . . but how can he when his own machines cut the ground out from under him?



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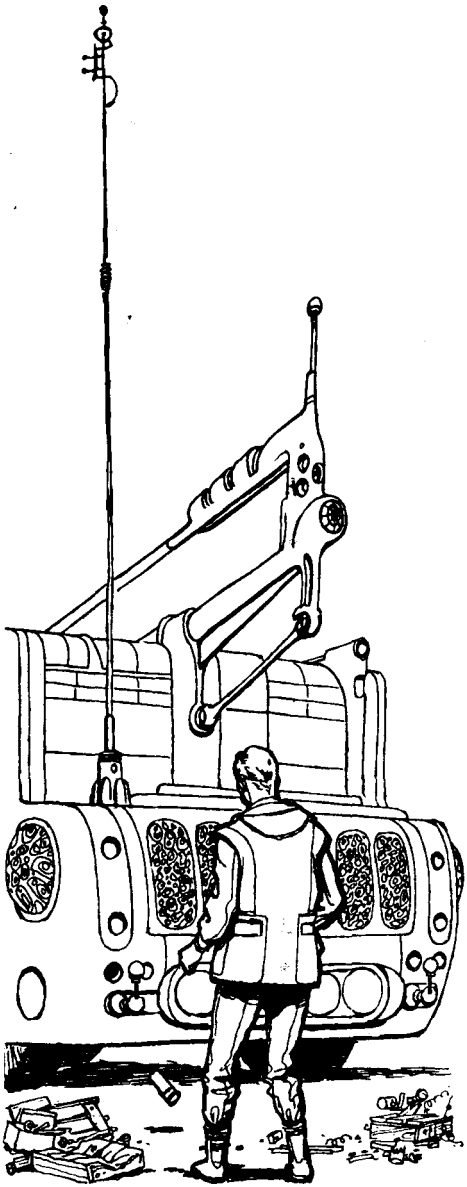

TENSION hung over the three waiting men. They smoked, paced back and forth, kicked aimlessly at weeds growing by the side of the road. A hot noonday sun glared down on brown fields, rows of neat plastic houses, the distant line of mountains to the west.

"Almost time," Earl Perine said, knotting his skinny hands together. "It varies according to the load, a half-second for every additional pound."

Bitterly, Morrison answered. "You've got it plotted? You're as bad as it is. Let's pretend it just *happens* to be late."

The third man said nothing. O'Neill was visiting from another settlement; he didn't know Perine and Morrison well enough to argue with them. Instead, he crouched down and arranged the papers clipped to his aluminum check-board. In the blazing sun, O'Neill's arms were tanned, furry, glistening with sweat. Wiry, with tangled gray hair, horn-rimmed glasses, he was older than the other two. He wore slacks, a sports shirt and crepe-soled shoes. Between his fingers, his fountain pen glittered, metallic and efficient.

"WHAT'RE you writing?" Perine grumbled.

"I'm laying out the procedure we're going to employ," O'Neill

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said mildly. "Better to systemize it now, instead of trying at random. We want to know what we tried and what didn't work. Otherwise we'll go around in a circle. The problem we have here is one of communication; that's how I see it."

"Communication," Morrison agreed in his deep, chesty voice. "Yes, we can't get in touch with the damn thing. It comes, leaves off its load and goes on—there's no contact between us and it."

"It's a machine," Perine said excitedly. "It's dead—blind and deaf."

"But it's in contact with the outside world," O'Neill pointed out. "There has to be some way to get to it. Specific semantic signals are meaningful to it; all we have to do is find those signals. Rediscover, actually. Maybe half a dozen out of a billion possibilities."

A low rumble interrupted the three men. They glanced up, wary and alert. The time had come.

"Here it is," Perine said. "Okay, wise guy, let's see you make one single change in its routine."

The truck was massive, rumbling under its tightly packed load. In many ways, it resembled conventional human-operated transportation vehicles, but with one exception — there was no driver's cabin. The horizontal surface was a loading stage, and the part that would normally be the headlights and radiator grill was a fibrous spongelike mass of receptors, the limited sensory apparatus of this mobile utility extension.

Aware of the three men, the truck slowed to a halt, shifted gears and pulled on its emergency brake. A moment passed as relays moved into action; then a portion of the loading surface tilted and a cascade of heavy cartons spilled down onto the brown dust of the roadway. With the objects fluttered a detailed inventory sheet.

"You know what to do," O'Neill said rapidly. "Hurry up, before it gets out of here."

Expertly, grimly, the three men grabbed up the deposited cartons and ripped the protective wrappers from them. Objects gleamed: a binocular microscope, a portable radio, heaps of plastic dishes, medical supplies, razor blades, clothing, food. Most of the shipment, as usual, was food. The three men systematically began smashing the objects. In a few minutes, there was nothing but a chaos of debris littered around them.

"That's that," O'Neill panted, stepping back. He fumbled for his check-sheet. "Now let's see what it does."

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THE truck had begun to move away; abruptly it stopped and backed toward them. Its receptors had taken in the fact that the three men had demolished the dropped-off portion of the load. It spun in a grinding half-circle and came around to face its receptor bank in their direction. Up went its antenna; it had begun communicating with the factory. Instructions were on the way.

A second, identical load was tilted and shoved off the truck.

"We failed," Perine groaned as a duplicate inventory sheet fluttered after the new load. "We destroyed all that stuff for nothing."

"What now?" Morrison asked O'Neill. "What's the next strategem on your board?"

"Give me a hand." O'Neill grabbed up a carton and lugged it back to the truck. Sliding the carton onto the platform, he turned for another. The other two men followed clumsily after him. They put the load back onto the truck. As the truck started forward, the last square box was again in place.

The truck hesitated. Its receptors registered the return of its load. From within its works came a low sustained buzzing.

"This may drive it crazy," O'Neill commented, sweating. "It went through its operation and accomplished nothing."

The truck made a short, abortive move toward going on. Then it swung purposefully around and, in a blur of speed, again dumped the load onto the road.

"Get them!" O'Neill yelled. The three men grabbed up the cartons and feverishly reloaded them. But as fast as the cartons were shoved back on the horizontal stage, the truck's grapples tilted them down its far-side ramps and onto the road.

"No use," Morrison said, breathing hard. "Water through a sieve."

"We're licked," Perine gasped in wretched agreement, "like always. We humans lose every time."

The truck regarded them calmly, its receptors blank and impassive. It was doing its job. The planetwide network of automatic factories was smoothly performing the task imposed on it five years before, in the early days of the Total Global Conflict.

"There it goes," Morrison observed dismally. The truck's antenna had come down; it shifted into low gear and released its parking brake.

"One last try," O'Neill said. He swept up one of the cartons and ripped it open. From it he dragged a ten-gallon milk tank and unscrewed the lid. "Silly as it seems."

"This is absurd," Perine pro-

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tested. Reluctantly, he found a cup among the littered debris and dipped it into the milk. "A kid's game!"

The truck had paused to observe them.

"Do it," O'Neill ordered sharply. "Exactly the way we practiced it."

The three of them drank quickly from the milk tank, visibly allowing the milk to spill down their chins; there had to be no mistaking what they were doing.

As planned, O'Neill was the first. His face twisting in revulsion, he hurled the cup away and violently spat milk into the road.

"God's sake!" he choked.

The other two did the same; stamping and loudly cursing, they kicked over the milk tank and glared accusingly at the truck.

"It's no good!" Morrison roared.

CURIOUS, the truck came slowly back. Electronic synapses clicked and whirred, responding to the situation; its antenna shot up like a flagpole.

"I think this is it," O'Neill said, trembling. As the truck watched, he dragged out a second milk tank, unscrewed its lid and tasted the contents. "The same!" he shouted at the truck. "It's just as bad!"

From the truck popped a metal cylinder. The cylinder dropped at Morrison's feet; he quickly snatched it up and tore it open.

STATE NATURE OF DEFECT

The instruction sheets listed rows of possible defects, with neat boxes by each; a punch-stick was included to indicate the particular deficiency of the product.

"What'll I check?" Morrison asked. "Contaminated? Bacterial? Sour? Rancid? Incorrectly labeled? Broken? Crushed? Cracked? Bent? Soiled?"

Thinking rapidly, O'Neill said, "Don't check any of them. The factory's undoubtedly ready to test and resample. It'll make its own analysis and then ignore us." His face glowed as frantic inspiration came. "Write in that blank at the bottom. It's an open space for further data."

"Write what?"

O'Neill said, "Write: *the product is thoroughly pizzled.*"

"What's that?" Perine demanded, baffled.

"Write it! It's a semantic garble—the factory won't be able to understand it. Maybe we can jam the works."

With O'Neill's pen, Morrison carefully wrote that the milk was pizzled. Shaking his head, he resealed the cylinder and returned

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it to the truck. The truck swept up the milk tanks and slammed its railing tidily into place. With a shriek of tires, it hurtled off. From its slot, a final cylinder bounced; the truck hurriedly departed, leaving the cylinder lying in the dust.

O'Neill got it open and held up the paper for the others to see.

A FACTORY REPRESENTATIVE WILL BE SENT OUT.
BE PREPARED TO SUPPLY COMPLETE DATA ON PRODUCT DEFICIENCY.

For a moment, the three men were silent. Then Perine began to giggle. "We did it. We contacted it. We got across."

"We sure did," O'Neill agreed. "It never heard of a product being pizzled."

Cut into the base of the mountains lay the vast metallic cube of the Kansas City factory. Its surface was corroded, pitted with radiation pox, cracked and scarred from the five years of war that had swept over it. Most of the factory was buried subsurface, only its entrance stages visible. The truck was a speck rumbling at high speed toward the expanse of black metal. Presently an opening formed in the uniform surface; the truck plunged into it and disappeared inside. The entrance snapped shut.

"Now the big job remains," O'Neill said. "Now we have to persuade it to close down operations—to shut itself off."

JUDITH O'NEILL served hot black coffee to the people sitting around the living room. Her husband talked while the others listened. O'Neill was as close to being an authority on the autofac system as could still be found.

In his own area, the Chicago region, he had shorted out the protective fence of the local factory long enough to get away with the data tapes stored in its posterior brain. The factory, of course, had immediately reconstructed a better type of fence. But he had shown that the factories were not infallible.

"The Institute of Applied Cybernetics," O'Neill explained, "had complete control over the network. Blame the war. Blame the big noise along the lines of communication that wiped out the knowledge we need. In any case, the Institute failed to transmit its information to us, so we can't transmit our information to the factories—the news that the war is over and we're ready to resume control of industrial operations."

"And meanwhile," Morrison added sourly, "the damn network expands and consumes more of our natural resources all the time."

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"I get the feeling," Judith said, "that if I stamped hard enough, I'd fall right down into a factory tunnel. They must have mines everywhere by now."

"Isn't there some limiting injunction?" Perine asked nervously. "Were they set up to expand indefinitely?"

"Each factory is limited to its own operational area," O'Neill said, "but the network itself is unbounded. It can go on scooping up our resources forever. The Institute decided it gets top priority; we mere people come second."

"Will there be *anything* left for us?" Morrison wanted to know.

"Not unless we can stop the network's operations. It's already used up half a dozen basic minerals. Its search teams are out all the time, from every factory, looking everywhere for some last scrap to drag home."

"What would happen if tunnels from two factories crossed each other?"

O'Neill shrugged. "Normally, that won't happen. Each factory has its own special section of our planet, its own private cut of the pie for its exclusive use."

"But it *could* happen."

"Well, they're raw-material-tropic; as long as there's anything left, they'll hunt it down." O'Neill pondered the idea with growing interest. "It's something to consider. I suppose as things get scarcer—"

He stopped talking. A figure had come into the room; it stood silently by the door, surveying them all.

IN the dull shadows, the figure looked almost human. For a brief moment, O'Neill thought it was a settlement latecomer. Then, as it moved forward, he realized that it was only quasi-human: a functional upright biped chassis, with data-receptors mounted at the top, effectors and proprioceptors mounted in a downward worm that ended in floor-grippers. Its resemblance to a human being was testimony to nature's efficiency; no sentimental imitation was intended.

The factory representative had arrived.

It began without preamble. "This is a data-collecting machine capable of communicating on an oral basis. It contains both broadcasting and receiving apparatus and can integrate facts relevant to its line of inquiry."

The voice was pleasant, confident. Obviously it was a tape, recorded by some Institute technician before the war. Coming from the quasi-human shape, it sounded grotesque; O'Neill could vividly imagine the dead young man whose cheerful voice now issued from the mechanical

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mouth of this upright construction of steel and wiring.

"One word of caution," the pleasant voice continued. "It is fruitless to consider this receptor human and to engage it in discussions for which it is not equipped. Although purposeful, it is not c a p a b l e of conceptual thought; it can only reassemble material already available to it."

The optimistic voice clicked out and a second voice came on. It resembled the first, but now there were no intonations or personal mannerisms. The machine was utilizing the dead man's phonetic speech-pattern for its own communication.

"Analysis of the rejected product," it stated, "shows no foreign elements or noticeable deterioration. The product meets the continual testing-standards employed throughout the network. Rejection is therefore on a basis outside the test area; standards not available to the network are being employed."

"That's right," O'Neill agreed. Weighing his words with care, he continued, "We found the milk substandard. We want nothing to do with it. We insist on more careful output."

The machine responded presently. "The semantic content of the term *pizzled* is unfamiliar to the network. It does not exist in the taped vocabulary. Can you present a factual analysis of the milk in terms of specific elements present or absent?"

"No," O'Neill said warily; the game he was playing was intricate and dangerous. "Pizzled is an over-all term. It can't be reduced to chemical constituents."

"What does pizzled signify?" the machine asked. "Can you define it in terms of alternate semantic symbols?"

O'NEILL hesitated. The representative had to be steered from its special inquiry to more general regions, to the ultimate problem of closing down the network. If he could pry it open at any point, get the theoretical discussion started . . .

"Pizzled," he stated, "means the condition of a product that is manufactured when no need exists. It indicates the rejection of objects on the grounds that they are no longer wanted."

The representative said, "Network analysis shows a need of high-grade pasteurized milk-substitute in this area. There is no alternate source; the network controls all the synthetic mammary-type equipment in existence." It added, "Original taped instructions describe milk as an essential to human diet."

O'Neill was being outwitted; the machine was returning the discussion to the specific. "We've

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decided," he said desperately, "that we don't *want* any more milk. We'd prefer to go without it, at least until we can locate cows."

"That is contrary to the network tapes," the representative objected. "There are no cows. All milk is produced synthetically."

"Then we'll produce it synthetically ourselves," Morrison broke in impatiently. "Why can't we take over the machines? My God, we're not children! We can run our own lives!"

The factory representative moved toward the door. "Until such time as your community finds other sources of milk-supply, the network will continue to supply you. Analytical and evaluating apparatus will remain in this area, conducting the customary random sampling."

Perine shouted futilely, "How can we find other sources? You have the whole setup! You're running the whole show!" Following after it, he bellowed, "You say we're not ready to run things —you claim we're not capable. How do you know? You don't give us a chance! We'll never have a chance!"

O'Neill was petrified. The machine was leaving; its one-track mind had completely triumphed.

"Look," he said hoarsely, blocking its way. "We want you to shut down, understand. We want to take over your equipment and run it ourselves. The war's over with. Damn it, you're not needed any more!"

THE factory representative paused briefly at the door. "The inoperative cycle," it said, "is not geared to begin until network production merely duplicates outside production. There is at this time, according to our continual sampling, no outside production. Therefore network production continues."

Without warning, Morrison swung the steel pipe in his hand. It slashed against the machine's shoulder and burst through the elaborate network of sensory apparatus that made up its chest. The tank of receptors shattered; bits of glass, wiring and minute parts showered everywhere.

"It's a paradox!" Morrison yelled. "A word game—a semantic game they're pulling on us. The Cyberneticists have it rigged." He raised the pipe and again brought it down savagely on the unprotesting machine. "They've got us hamstrung. We're completely helpless."

The room was in uproar. "It's the only way," Perine gasped as he pushed past O'Neill. "We'll have to destroy them—it's the network or us." Grabbing down a lamp, he hurled it in the "face" of the factory representative. The

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lamp and the intricate surface of plastic burst; Perine waded in, groping blindly for the machine. Now all the people in the room were closing furiously around the upright cylinder, their impotent resentment boiling over. The machine sank down and disappeared as they dragged it to the floor.

Trembling, O'Neill turned away. His wife caught hold of his arm and led him to the side of the room.

"The idiots," he said dejectedly. "They can't destroy it; they'll only teach it to build more defenses. They're making the whole problem worse."

Into the living room rolled a network repair team. Expertly, the mechanical units detached themselves from the half-track mother-bug and scurried toward the mound of struggling humans. They slid between people and rapidly burrowed. A moment later, the inert carcass of the factory representative was dragged into the hopper of the mother-bug. Parts were collected, torn remnants gathered up and carried off. The last plastic strut and gear was located. Then the units restationed themselves on the bug and the team departed.

Through the open door came a second factory representative, an exact duplicate of the first. And outside in the hall stood two more upright machines. The settlement had been combed at random by a corps of representatives. Like a horde of ants, the mobile data-collecting machines had filtered through the town until, by chance, one of them had come across O'Neill.

"Destruction of network mobile data-gathering equipment is detrimental to best human interests," the factory representative informed the roomful of people. "Raw material intake is at a dangerously low ebb; what basic materials still exist should be utilized in the manufacture of consumer commodities."

O'Neill and the machine stood facing each other.

"Oh?" O'Neill said softly. "That's interesting. I wonder what you're lowest on—and what you'd really be willing to fight for."

HELICOPTER rotors whined tinnily above O'Neill's head; he ignored them and peered through the cabin window at the ground not far below.

Slag and ruins stretched everywhere. Weeds poked their way up, sickly stalks among which insects scuttled. Here and there, rat colonies were visible: matted hovels constructed of bone and rubble. Radiation had mutated the rats, along with most insects and animals. A little farther, O'Neill identified a squadron of

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birds pursuing a ground squirrel. The squirrel dived into a carefully prepared crack in the surface of slag and the birds turned, thwarted.

"You think we'll ever have it rebuilt?" Morrison asked. "It makes me sick to look at it."

"In time," O'Neill answered. "Assuming, of course, that we get industrial control back. And assuming that anything remains to work with. At best, it'll be slow. We'll have to inch out from the settlements."

To the right was a human colony, tattered scarecrows, gaunt and emaciated, living among the ruins of what had once been a town. A few acres of barren soil had been cleared; drooping vegetables wilted in the sun, chickens wandered listlessly here and there, and a fly-bothered horse lay panting in the shade of a crude shed.

"Ruins-squatters," O'Neill said gloomily. "Too far from the network—not tangent to any of the factories."

"It's their own fault," Morrison told him angrily. "They could come into one of the settlements."

"That was their town. They're trying to do what *we're* trying to do—build up things again on their own. But they're starting now, without tools or machines, with their bare hands, nailing to-

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gether bits of rubble. And it won't work. We need machines. We can't repair ruins; we've got to start industrial production."

Ahead lay a series of broken hills, chipped remains that had once been a ridge. Beyond stretched out the titanic ugly sore of an H-bomb crater, half-filled with stagnant water and slime, a disease-ridden inland sea.

And beyond that—a glitter of busy motion.

"There," O'Neill said tensely. He lowered the helicopter rapidly. "Can you tell which factory they're from?"

"They all look alike to me," Morrison muttered, leaning over to see. "We'll have to wait and follow them back, when they get a load."

"*If* they get a load," O'Neill corrected.

THE autofac exploring crew ignored the helicopter buzzing overhead and concentrated on its job. Ahead of the main truck scuttled two tractors; they made their way up mounds of rubble, probes burgeoning like quills, shot down the far slope and disappeared into a blanket of ash that lay spread over the slag. The two scouts burrowed until only their antennae were visible. They burst up to the surface and scuttled on, their treads whirring and clanking.

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"What are they after?" Morrison asked.

"God knows." O'Neill leafed intently through the papers on his clip-board. "We'll have to analyze all our back-order slips."

Below them, the autofac exploring crew disappeared behind. The helicopter passed over a deserted stretch of sand and slag on which nothing moved. A grove of scrub-brush appeared and then, far to the right, a series of tiny moving dots.

A procession of automatic ore carts was racing over the bleak slag, a string of rapidly moving metal trucks that followed one another nose to tail. O'Neill turned the helicopter toward them and a few minutes later it hovered above the mine itself.

Masses of squat mining equipment had made their way to the operations. Shafts had been sunk; empty carts waited in patient rows. A steady stream of loaded carts hurried toward the horizon, dribbling ore after them. Activity and the noise of machines hung over the area, an abrupt center of industry in the bleak wastes of slag.

"Here comes that exploring crew," Morrison observed, peering back the way they had come. "You think maybe they'll tangle?" He grinned. "No, I guess it's too much to hope for."

"It is this time," O'Neill answered. "They're looking for different substances, probably. And they're normally conditioned to ignore each other."

The first of the exploring bugs reached the line of ore carts. It veered slightly and continued its search; the carts traveled in their inexorable line as if nothing had happened.

Disappointed, Morrison turned away from the window and swore. "No use. It's like each doesn't exist for the other."

Gradually the exploring crew moved away from the line of carts, past the mining operations and over a ridge beyond. There was no special hurry; they departed without having reacted to the ore-gathering syndrome.

"Maybe they're from the same factory," Morrison said hopefully.

O'Neill pointed to the antennae visible on the major mining equipment. "Their vanes are turned at a different vector, so these represent two factories. It's going to be hard; we'll have to get it exactly right or there won't be any reaction." He clicked on the radio and got hold of the monitor at the settlement. "Any results on the consolidated back-order sheets?"

The operator put him through to the settlement governing offices.

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"They're starting to come in," Perine told him. "As soon as we get sufficient samplings, we'll try to determine which raw materials which factories lack. It's going to be risky, trying to extrapolate from complex products. There may be a number of basic elements common to the various sub-lots."

"What happens when we've identified the missing element?" Morrison asked O'Neill. "What happens when we've got two tangent factories short on the same material?"

"Then," O'Neill said grimly, "we start collecting the material ourselves—even if we have to melt down every object in the settlements."

III

IN the moth-ridden darkness of night, a dim wind stirred, chill and faint. Dense underbrush rattled metallically. Here and there a nocturnal rodent prowled, its senses hyper-alert, peering, planning, seeking food.

The area was wild. No human settlements existed for miles; the entire region had been seared flat, cauterized by repeated H-bomb blasts. Somewhere in the murky darkness, a sluggish trickle of water made its way among slag and weeds, dripping thickly into what had once been an elaborate labyrinth of sewer mains. The pipes lay cracked and broken, jutting up into the night darkness, overgrown with creeping vegetation. The wind raised clouds of black ash that swirled and danced among the weeds. Once, an enormous mutant wren stirred sleepily, pulled its crude protective night coat of rags around it and again dozed off.

FOR a time, there was no movement. A streak of stars showed in the sky overhead, glowing starkly, remotely. Earl Perine shivered, peered up and huddled closer to the pulsing heat-element placed on the ground between the three men.

"Well?" Morrison challenged, teeth chattering.

O'Neill didn't answer. He finished his cigarette, crushed it against a mound of decaying slag and, getting out his lighter, lit another. The mass of tungsten—the bait—lay a hundred yards directly ahead of them.

During the last few days, both the Detroit and Pittsburgh factories had run short of tungsten. And in at least one sector, their apparatus overlapped. This sluggish heap represented precision cutting tools, parts ripped from electrical switches, high-quality surgical equipment, sections of permanent magnets, measuring devices . . . tungsten from every

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possible source, gathered feverishly from all the settlements.

Dark mist lay spread over the tungsten mound. Occasionally, a night moth fluttered down, attracted by the glow of reflected starlight. The moth hung momentarily, beat its elongated wings futilely against the interwoven tangle of metal and then drifted off, into the shadows of the thick-packed vines that rose up from the stumps of sewer pipes.

"Not a very damn pretty spot," Perine said wryly.

"Don't kid yourself," O'Neill retorted. "This is the prettiest spot on Earth. This is the spot that marks the grave of the autofac network. People are going to come around here looking for it someday. There's going to be a plaque here a mile high."

"You're trying to keep your morale up," Morrison snorted. "You don't believe they're going to slaughter themselves over a heap of surgical tools and lightbulb filaments. They've probably got a machine down in the bottom level that sucks tungsten out of rock."

"Maybe," O'Neill said, slapping at a mosquito. The insect dodged cannily and then buzzed over to annoy Perine. Perine swung viciously at it and squatted sullenly down against the damp vegetation.

And there was what they had come to see.

O'NEILL realized with a start that he had been looking at it for several minutes without recognizing it. The search-bug lay absolutely still. It rested at the crest of a small rise of slag, its anterior end slightly raised, receptors fully extended. It might have been an abandoned hulk; there was no activity of any kind, no sign of life or consciousness. The search-bug fitted perfectly into the wasted, fire-drenched landscape. A vague tub of metal sheets and gears and flat treads, it rested and waited. And watched.

It was examining the heap of tungsten. The bait had drawn its first bite.

"Fish,' ' Perine said thickly. "The line moved. I think the sinker dropped."

"What the hell are you mumbling about?" Morrison grunted. And then he, too, saw the search-bug. "Jesus," he whispered. He half-rose to his feet, massive body arched forward. "Well, there's *one* of them. Now all we need is a unit from the other factory. Which do you suppose it is?"

O'Neill located the communication vane and traced its angle. "Pittsburgh, so pray for Detroit . . . pray like mad."

Satisfied, the search-bug de-

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tached itself and rolled forward. Cautiously approaching the mound, it began a series of intricate maneuvers, rolling first one way and then another. The three watching men were mystified—until they glimpsed the first probing stalks of other search-bugs.

"Communication," O'Neill said softly. "Like bees."

Now five Pittsburgh search-bugs were approaching the mound of tungsten products. Receptors waving excitedly, they increased their pace, scurrying in a sudden burst of discovery up the side of the mound to the top. A bug burrowed and rapidly disappeared. The whole mound shuddered; the bug was down inside, exploring the extent of the find.

Ten minutes later, the first Pittsburgh ore carts appeared and began industriously hurrying off with their haul.

"Damn it!" O'Neill said, agonized. "They'll have it all before Detroit shows up."

"Can't we do anything to slow them down?" Perine demanded helplessly. Leaping to his feet, he grabbed up a rock and heaved it at the nearest cart. The rock bounced off and the cart continued its work, unperturbed.

O'Neill got to his feet and prowled around, body rigid with impotent fury. Where were they? The autofacs were equal in all respects and the spot was the exact same linear distance from each center. Theoretically, the parties should have arrived simultaneously. Yet there was no sign of Detroit—and the final pieces of tungsten were being loaded before his eyes.

But then something streaked past him.

HE didn't recognize it, for the object moved too quickly. It shot like a bullet among the tangled vines, raced up the side of the hill-crest, poised for an instant to aim itself and hurtled down the far side. It smashed directly into the lead cart. Projectile and victim shattered in an abrupt burst of sound.

Morrison leaped up. "What the hell?"

"That's it!" Perine screamed, dancing around and waving his skinny arms. "It's Detroit!"

A second Detroit search-bug appeared, hesitated as it took in the situation, and then flung itself furiously at the retreating Pittsburgh carts. Fragments of tungsten scattered everywhere—parts, wiring, broken plates, gears and springs and bolts of the two antagonists flew in all directions. The remaining carts wheeled screechingly; one of them dumped its load and rattled off at top speed. A second followed, still

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weighed down with tungsten. A Detroit search-bug caught up with it, spun directly in its path and neatly overturned it. Bug and cart rolled down a shallow trench, into a stagnant pool of water. Dripping and glistening, the two of them struggled, half-submerged.

"Well," O'Neill said unsteadily, "we did it. We can start back home." His legs felt weak. "Where's our vehicle?"

As he gunned the truck motor, something flashed a long way off, something large and metallic, moving over the dead slag and ash. It was a dense clot of carts, a solid expanse of heavy-duty ore carriers racing to the scene. Which factory were they from?

It didn't matter, for out of the thick tangle of black dripping vines, a web of counter-extensions was creeping to meet them. Both factories were assembling their mobile units. From all directions, bugs slithered and crept, closing in around the remaining heap of tungsten. Neither factory was going to let needed raw material get away; neither was going to give up its find. Blindly, mechanically, in the grip of inflexible directives, the two opponents labored to assemble superior forces.

"Come on," Morrison said urgently. "Let's get out of here. All hell is bursting loose."

O'Neill hastily turned the truck in the direction of the settlement. They began rumbling through the darkness on their way back. Every now and then, a metallic shape shot by them, going in the opposite direction.

"Did you see the load in that last cart?" Perine asked, worried. "It wasn't empty."

NEITHER were the carts that followed it, a whole procession of bulging supply carriers directed by an elaborate high-level surveying unit.

"Guns," Morrison said, eyes wide with apprehension. "They're taking in weapons. But who's going to use them?"

"They are," O'Neill answered. He indicated a movement to their right. "Look over there. This is something we hadn't expected."

They were seeing the first factory representative move into action.

As the truck pulled into the Kansas City settlement, Judith hurried breathlessly toward them. Fluttering in her hand was a strip of metal-foil paper.

"What is it?" O'Neill demanded, grabbing it from her.

"Just came." His wife struggled to catch her breath. "A mobile car—raced up, dropped it off—and left. Big excitement. Golly, the factory's—a blaze of lights. You can see it for miles."

O'Neill scanned the paper. It

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was a factory certification for the last group of settlement-placed orders, a total tabulation of requested and factory-analyzed needs. Stamped across the list in heavy black type were six foreboding words:

ALL SHIPMENTS SUSPENDED
UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE

Letting out his breath harshly, O'Neill handed the paper over to Perine. "No more consumer goods," he said ironically, a nervous grin twitching across his face. "The network's going on a wartime footing."

"Then we did it?" Morrison asked haltingly.

"That's right," O'Neill said. Now that the conflict had been sparked, he felt a growing, frigid terror. "Pittsburgh and Detroit are in it to the finish. It's too late for us to change our minds, now —they're lining up allies."

IV

COOL morning sunlight lay across the ruined plain of black metallic ash. The ash smoldered a dull, unhealthy red; it was still warm.

"Watch your step," O'Neill cautioned. Grabbing hold of his wife's arm, he led her from the rusty, sagging truck, up onto the top of a pile of strewn concrete blocks, the scattered remains of a pillbox installation. Earl Perine followed, making his way carefully, hesitantly.

Behind them, the dilapidated settlement lay spread out, a disorderly checkerboard of houses, buildings and streets. Since the autofac network had closed down its supply and maintenance, the human settlements had fallen into semi-barbarism. The commodities that remained were broken and only partly usable. It had been over a year since the last mobile factory truck had appeared, loaded with food, tools, clothing and repair parts. From the flat expanse of dark concrete and metal at the foot of the mountains, nothing had emerged in their direction.

Their wish had been granted—they were cut off, detached from the network.

On their own.

Around the settlement grew ragged fields of wheat and tattered stalks of sun-baked vegetables. Crude handmade tools had been distributed, primitive artifacts hammered out with great labor by the various settlements. The settlements were linked only by horse-drawn cart and by the slow stutter of the telegraph key.

They had managed to keep their organization, though. Goods and services were exchanged on a

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slow, steady basis. Basic commodities were produced and distributed. The clothing that O'Neill and his wife and Earl Perine wore was coarse and unbleached, but sturdy. And they had managed to convert a few of the trucks from gasoline to wood.

"Here we are," O'Neill said. "We can see from here."

"Is it worth it?" Judith asked, exhausted. Bending down, she plucked aimlessly at her shoe, trying to dig a pebble from the soft hide hole. "It's a long way to come, to see something we've seen every day for thirteen months."

"True," O'Neill admitted, his hand briefly resting on his wife's slim shoulder. "But this may be the last. And that's what we want to see."

IN the gray sky above them, a swift circling dot of opaque black moved. High, remote, the dot spun and darted, following an intricate and wary course. Gradually, its gyrations moved it toward the mountains and the bleak expanse of bomb-rubbled structure sunk in their base.

"San Francisco," O'Neill explained. "One of those long-range hawk projectiles, all the way from the West Coast."

"And you think it's the last?" Perine asked.

"It's the only one we've seen this month." O'Neill seated himself and began sprinkling dried bits of tobacco into a trench of brown paper. "And we used to see hundreds."

"Maybe they have something better," Judith suggested. She found a smooth rock and tiredly seated herself. "Could it be?"

Her husband smiled ironically. "No. They don't have anything better."

The three of them were tensely silent. Above them, the circling dot of black drew closer. There was no sign of activity from the flat surface of metal and concrete; the Kansas City factory remained inert, totally unresponsive. A few billows of warm ash drifted across it and one end was partly submerged in ruble. The factory had taken numerous direct hits. Across the plain, the furrows of its sub-surface tunnels lay exposed, clogged with debris and the dark, water-seeking tendrils of tough vines.

"Those damn vines," Perine grumbled, picking at an old sore on his unshaven chin. "They're taking over the world."

Here and there around the factory, the demolished ruin of a mobile extension rusted in the morning dew. Carts, trucks, search-bugs, factory representatives, weapons carriers, guns, supply trains, sub-surface projec-

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tiles, indiscriminate parts of machinery mixed and fused together in shapeless piles. Some had been destroyed returning to the factory; others had been contacted as they emerged, fully loaded, heavy with equipment. The factory itself—what remained of it—seemed to have settled more deeply into the earth. Its upper surface was barely visible, almost lost in drifting ash.

In four days, there had been no known activity, no visible movement of any sort.

"It's dead," Perine said. "You can see it's dead."

O'Neill didn't answer. Squatting down, he made himself comfortable and prepared to wait. In his own mind, he was sure that some fragment of automation remained in the eroded factory. Time would tell. He examined his wristwatch; it was eight-thirty. In the old days, the factory would be starting its daily routine. Processions of trucks and varied mobile units would be coming to the surface, loaded with supplies, to begin their expeditions to the human settlement.

Off to the right, something stirred. He quickly turned his attention to it.

A SINGLE battered ore-gathering cart was creeping clumsily toward the factory. One last damaged mobile unit trying to complete its task. The cart was virtually empty; a few meager scraps of metal lay strewn in its hold. A scavenger . . . the metal was sections ripped from destroyed equipment encountered on the way. Feebly, like a blind metallic insect, the cart approached the factory. Its progress was incredibly jerky. Every now and then, it halted, bucked and quivered, and wandered aimlessly off the path.

"Control is bad," Judith said, with a touch of horror in her voice. "The factory's having trouble guiding it back."

Yes, he had seen that. Around New York, the factory had lost its high-frequency transmitter completely. Its mobile units had floundered in crazy gyrations, racing in random circles, crashing against rocks and trees, sliding into gullies, overturning, finally unwinding and becoming reluctantly inanimate.

The ore cart reached the edge of the ruined plain and halted briefly. Above it, the dot of black still circled the sky. For a time, the cart remained frozen.

"The factory's trying to decide," Perine said. "It needs the material, but it's afraid of that hawk up there."

The factory debated and nothing stirred. Then the ore cart again resumed its unsteady crawl.

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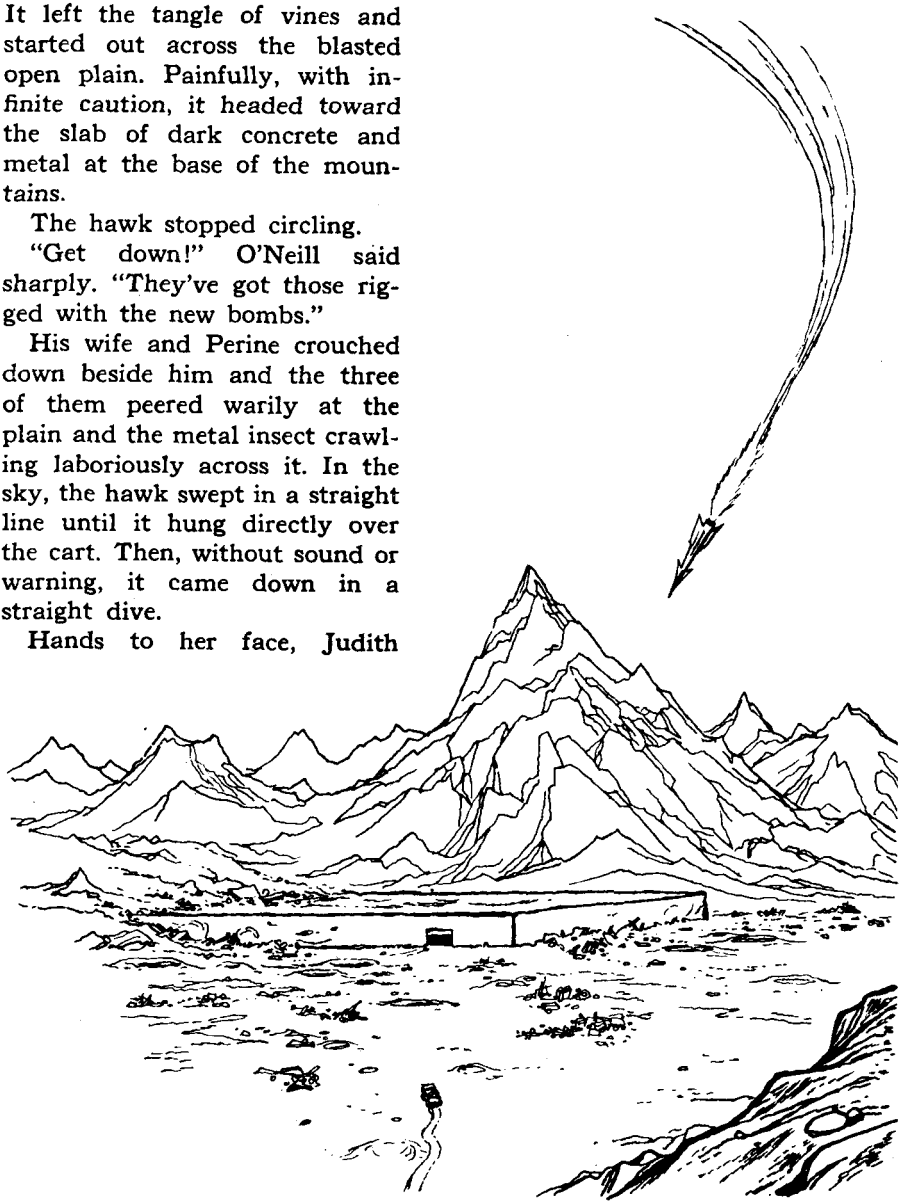
It left the tangle of vines and started out across the blasted open plain. Painfully, with infinite caution, it headed toward the slab of dark concrete and metal at the base of the mountains.

The hawk stopped circling.

"Get down!" O'Neill said sharply. "They've got those rigged with the new bombs."

His wife and Perine crouched down beside him and the three of them peered warily at the plain and the metal insect crawling laboriously across it. In the sky, the hawk swept in a straight line until it hung directly over the cart. Then, without sound or warning, it came down in a straight dive.

Hands to her face, Judith



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shrieked, "I can't watch! It's *awful!* Like wild animals!"

"It's not after the cart," O'Neill grated.

As the airborne projectile dropped, the cart put on a burst of desperate speed. It raced noisily toward the factory, clanking and rattling, trying in a last futile attempt to reach safety. Forgetting the menace above, the frantically eager factory opened up and guided its mobile unit directly inside. And the hawk had what it wanted.

BEMORE the barrier could close, the hawk swooped down in a long glide parallel with the ground. As the cart disappeared into the depths of the factory, the hawk shot after it, a swift shimmer of metal that hurtled past the clanking cart. Suddenly aware, the factory snapped the barrier shut. Grotesquely, the cart struggled; it was caught fast in the half-closed entrance.

But whether it freed itself didn't matter. There was a dull, rumbling stir. The g r o u n d moved, billowed, then settled back. A deep shock wave passed beneath the three watching human beings. From the factory rose a single column of black smoke. The surface of concrete split; like a dried pod, it shriveled and broke, and dribbled shattered bits of itself in a shower of ruin. The smoke hung for a while, drifting aimlessly away with the morning wind.

The factory was a fused, gutted wreck. It had been penetrated and destroyed.

O'Neill got stiffly to his feet. "That's that. All over with. We've got what we set out after —we've destroyed the autofac network." He glanced at Perine. "Or *was* that what we were after?"

They looked toward the settlement that lay behind them. Little remained of the orderly rows of houses and streets of the previous year. Without the network, the settlement had rapidly decayed. The original prosperous neatness had dissipated; the settlement was shabby, ill-kept.

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"Of course," Perine said haltingly. "Once we get into the factories and start setting up our own assembly lines . . ."

"Is there anything left?" Judith inquired.

"There must be something left. My God, there were levels going down *miles!*"

"Some of those bombs they developed toward the end were awfully big," Judith pointed out. "Better than anything we had in our war."

"Remember that camp we saw? The ruins-squatters?"

"I wasn't along," Perine said.

"They were like wild animals. Eating roots and larvae. Sharpening rocks, tanning hides. Savagery. Bestiality."

"But that's what people like that want," Perine answered defensively.

"Do they? Do we want this?" O'Neill indicated the straggling settlement. "Is this what we set out looking for, that day we collected the tungsten? Or that day we told the factory truck its milk was—" He couldn't remember the word.

"Pizzled," Judith supplied.

"Come on," O'Neill said. "Let's get started. Let's see what's left of that factory—left for us."

THEY approached the ruined factory late in the afternoon. Four trucks rumbled shakily up to the rim of the gutted pit and halted, motors steaming, tailpipes dripping. Wary and alert, workmen scrambled down and stepped gingerly across the hot ash.

"Maybe it's too soon," one of them objected.

O'Neill had no intention of waiting. "Come on," he ordered. Grabbing up a flashlight, he stepped down into the crater.

The shattered hull of the Kansas City factory lay directly ahead. In its gutted mouth, the ore cart still hung caught, but it was no longer struggling. Beyond the cart was an ominous pool of gloom. O'Neill flashed his light through the entrance; the tangled, jagged remains of upright supports were visible.

"We want to get down deep," he said to Morrison, who prowled cautiously beside him. "If there's anything left, it's at the bottom."

Morrison grunted. "Those boring moles from Atlanta got most of the deep layers."

"Until the others got their mines sunk." O'Neill stepped carefully through the sagging entrance, climbed a heap of debris that had been tossed against the slit from inside, and found himself within the factory—an expanse of confused wreckage, without pattern or meaning.

"Entropy," Morrison breathed, oppressed. "The thing it always

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hated. The thing it was built to fight. Random particles everywhere. No purpose to it."

"Down underneath," O'Neill said stubbornly, "we may find some sealed enclaves. I know they got so they were dividing up into autonomous sections, trying to preserve repair units intact, to reform the composite factory."

"The moles got most of them, too," Morrison observed, but he lumbered after O'Neill.

Behind them, the workmen came slowly. A section of wreckage shifted ominously and a shower of hot fragments cascaded down.

"You men get back to the trucks," O'Neill said. "No sense endangering any more of us than we have to. If Morrison and I don't come back, forget us—don't risk sending a rescue party." As they left, he pointed out to Morrison a descending ramp still partially intact. "Let's get below."

SILENTLY, the two men passed one dead level after another. Endless miles of dark ruin stretched out, without sound or activity. The vague shapes of darkened machinery, unmoving belts and conveyer equipment were partially visible, and the partially completed husks of war projectiles, bent and twisted by the final blast.

"We can salvage some of that," O'Neill said, but he didn't actually believe it. The machinery was fused, shapeless. Everything in the factory had run together, molten slag without form or use. "Once we get it to the surface . . ."

"We can't," Morrison contradicted bitterly. "We don't have hoists or winches." He kicked at a heap of charred supplies that had stopped along its broken belt and spilled halfway across the ramp.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," O'Neill said as the two of them continued past the vacant levels of inert machines. "But now that I look back, I'm not so sure."

They had penetrated a long way into the factory. The final level lap spread out ahead of them. O'Neill flashed the light here and there, trying to locate undestroyed sections, portions of the assembly process still intact.

It was Morrison who felt it first. He suddenly dropped to his hands and knees; heavy body pressed against the floor, he lay listening, face hard, eyes wide. "For God's sake—"

"What is it?" O'Neill cried. Then he, too, felt it. Beneath them, a faint, insistent vibration hummed through the floor, a steady hum of activity. They had been wrong; the hawk had not

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been totally successful. Below, in a deeper level, the factory was still alive. Closed, limited operations still went on.

"On its own," O'Neill muttered, searching for an extension of the descent lift. "Autonomous activity, set to continue after the rest is gone. How do we get down?"

The descent lift was broken off, sealed by a thick section of metal. The still-living layer beneath their feet was completely cut off; there was no entrance.

RACING back the way they had come, O'Neill reached the surface and hailed the first truck. "Where the hell's the torch? Give it here!"

The precious blowtorch was passed to him and he hurried back, puffing, into the depths of the ruined factory where Morrison waited. Together, the two of them began frantically cutting through the warped metal flooring, burning apart the sealed layers of protective mesh.

"It's coming," Morrison gasped, squinting in the glare of the torch. The plate fell with a clang, disappearing into the level below. A blaze of white light burst up around them and the two men leaped back.

In the sealed chamber, furious activity boomed and echoed, a steady process of moving belts, whirring machine-tools, fast-moving mechanical supervisors. At one end, a steady flow of raw materials entered the line; at the far end, the final product was whipped off, inspected and crammed into a conveyer tube.

All this was visible for a split second; then the intrusion was discovered. Robot relays closed as automatic reflexes came into play. The blaze of lights flickered and dimmed. The assembly line froze to a halt, stopped in its furious activity.

The machines clicked off and became silent.

At one end, a mobile unit detached itself and sped up the wall toward the hole O'Neill and Morrison had cut. It slammed an emergency seal in place and expertly welded it tight. The scene below was gone. A moment later the floor shivered as activity resumed.

Morrison, white-faced and shaking, turned to O'Neill. "What are they doing? What are they making?"

"Not weapons," O'Neill said.

"That stuff is being sent up—" Morrison gestured convulsively —"to the surface."

Shakily, O'Neill climbed to his feet. "Can we locate the spot?"

"I—think so."

"We better." O'Neill swept up the flashlight and started toward the ascent ramp. "We're going to

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have to see what those pellets are that they're shooting up."

THE exit valve of the conveyor tube was concealed in a tangle of vines and ruins a quarter of a mile beyond the factory. In a slot of rock at the base of the mountains, the valve poked up like a nozzle. From ten yards away, it was invisible; the two men were almost on top of it before they noticed it.

Every few moments, a pellet burst from the valve and shot up into the sky. The nozzle revolved and altered its angle of deflection; each pellet was launched in a slightly varied trajectory.

"How far are they going?" Morrison wondered.

"Probably varies. It's distributing them at random." O'Neill advanced cautiously, but the mechanism took no notice of him. Plastered against the towering wall of rock was a crumpled pellet; by accident, the nozzle had released it directly at the mountainside. O'Neill climbed up, got it and jumped down.

The pellet was a smashed container of machinery, tiny metallic elements too minute to be analyzed without a microscope.

"Not a weapon," O'Neill said.

The cylinder had split. At first he couldn't tell if it had been the impact or deliberate internal mechanisms at work. From the rent, an ooze of metal bits was sliding. Squatting down, O'Neill examined them.

The bits were in motion. Microscopic machinery, smaller than ants, smaller than pins, working energetically, purposefully — constructing something that looked like a tiny rectangle of steel.

"They're building," O'Neill said, awed. He got up and prowled on. Off to the side, at the far edge of the gully, he came across a downed pellet far advanced on its construction. Apparently it had been released some time ago.

This one had made great enough progress to be identified. Minute as it was, the structure was familiar. The machinery was building a miniature replica of the demolished factory.

"Well," O'Neill said thoughtfully, "we're back where we started from. For better or worse . . . I don't know."

"I guess they must be all over Earth by now," Morrison said, "landing everywhere and going to work."

A thought struck O'Neill. "Maybe some of them are geared to escape velocity. That would be neat—autofac networks throughout the whole universe."

Behind him, the nozzle continued to spurt out its torrent of metal seeds.

—PHILIP K. DICK

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CAUSE OF DEATH

By MAX TADLOCK

Reaching the ultimate secret was no problem . . . but could I follow it up with an encore?

Illustrated by JOHNS

ABOUT THIS thing, I couldn't stand to have them laugh. Not the way they did about the swimming.

"Oh, come now. No one could learn to swim by reading a book. Five-eighths of a mile the first time in the water!"

And they laughed. I guess I laughed, too. More than any other thing, I've wanted people to be happy. But I never swam again — only that first time.

I've always read a lot and sometimes things I've read do get mixed up with things I've

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done. But the things still happened — they happened to *someone*. And people ought to *believe*.

I'd like to tell people now. I'd like to say, "I died once."

But if they laughed, it might be later and I'd never hear them. Already there are too many silent things in this. There must be no silent laughter as well.

They might think I've got myself all mixed up with things I've read. Things like surgeons pumping life into a heart to bring the patient back after he's died on the operating table. Doctors reviving dead soldiers, if they haven't been gone too long.

It's not like that at all. I was truly dead — for three days. It was almost too long; I suppose I made it back just in time. I don't know.

My reading was what started me on this, just the same as with the swimming. When I think about it too much, I almost feel myself that I am exaggerating a bit.

But I have proof, proof which no one has ever seen but the doctors and those who found me. See how they keep me swathed in these cloths and how the darkened room hides my eyes?

Anyway, I'd be ashamed to show myself, for the mark of death is too terrible and people would be even more afraid of dying than they are now.

YOU SEE, I could have done it in the winter, only I was worried about the cold. I might not have been able to get back at all. But it was too warm when I chose to do it. I should have known better. I've read a lot about keeping things. You can't preserve them in the hot weather; that's why the doctors put those dead soldiers in ice chests, but I didn't think about it enough. I made some other mistakes, too, but I couldn't have known.

I guess what started it all was something I read a long time ago, perhaps in a story, or an agricultural bulletin, or maybe in an encyclopedia. Anyhow, it was something about pigs being able to just die if they want to.

That always stuck in my mind. It's a pretty wonderful thing, you know. Imagine just being able to die if life didn't seem worth living, or if you were lonely, or maybe just because you wanted to.

Oh, I told lots of people about it. You know how sometimes a lull comes in a conversation. Then I'd say, "Pigs are able to just up and die if they want to."

But nobody ever paid any attention to me at all. They seemed to ignore the remark. One man did say once, "What the hell are you talking about?" but even he wouldn't listen when I tried to explain.

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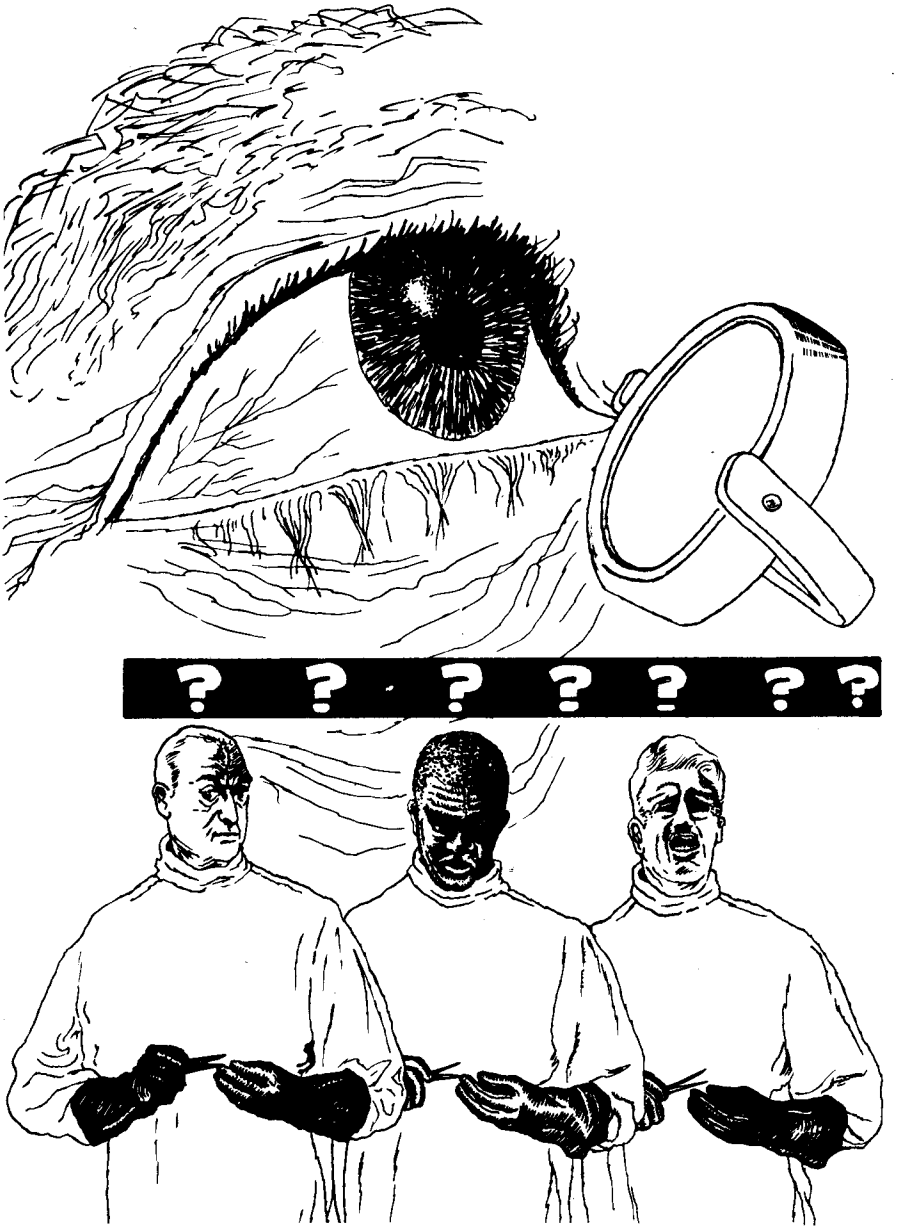

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Perhaps it was just too improbable. Besides, people don't like to think about death. They talk about it sometimes and sometimes they brood about it, but they never really think. It has always been too unknown and that frightens them. Then they only fear and stop thinking.

It always did seem sad to me that no one had ever tried to help people out about death. Yes, I know one did. He died and came back — but then He wasn't just a man like you or me. And even He never said exactly what it was like.

I wondered if anyone really ever *had* said. So I began to read with only a single purpose in mind. I had to know so I could tell people. If they could only know, then they wouldn't have that fear and we could talk of death and still be able to laugh.

But I had read it all when I read of Jacob's dream, for that's all there was — dreams, visions, hopes. No one had ever seen and come back to tell the others.

The question then was *why*, not *what*. It couldn't be that all who died had no whole being to return to. Not every death is marked by a body completely uninhabitable. I myself had heard a doctor say, "There is nothing organically wrong now. The patient will recover if only he has the will to live."

The will to live! Suddenly I knew I had found the way. I myself would go and see and return to tell them all.

I ANSWERED all the requirements. I had a healthy body to return to. I had the will to live, for I enjoy my reading and acquaintances. And I alone had thought it wonderful that pigs can die when they merely want to.

I knew that I could, too, and I was not afraid. Very carefully, I began what seemed almost too simple preparations.

Drawing some money from an account I kept for medical expenses (at the time I thought this very amusing), I bought an electric clock which registered the hour and the day of the month on cylinders like those on a tachometer. I felt I would want to know exactly how long I had been deceased when I came back.

Next I secured a small round mirror with a concave face, the type some use for shaving. This I was to hang directly above my face. It was merely vanity on my part, for I wished to say that I as well as Lazurus's friends had seen a dead man rise. I had assumed that at first my vision might be blurred and thus the magnifying effect of this particular glass would, I thought, help me focus on my face.

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On my study floor, I prepared a pallet. It was neither soft nor hard, just a comfortable support for the body I was to leave. Beside it I arranged a basin of water and some soft cloths, for I would want to wash right after coming back.

You see, I did not fear the obvious. My power lay in thought and I proceeded systematically.

Drawn blinds and two small night-lights spread a gray cast over the room, a cast that I was to know too well.

Everything was ready now. No, wait! Quickly I placed a tumbler and a decanter of brandy within easy reach and by them laid a pencil and a pad of paper. It was when I straightened up that I first felt the pounding in my body. My heart pulsed as if it were smashing waves of blood through my veins. In my throat, the large arteries swelled with pressure until I thought I would strangle.

I had to have some physical exertion to relieve the tension. I felt I might faint or have a stroke unless I moved about. My father had been stricken with an embolism at about my age, and I've read such weaknesses are inherited.

So I walked about the house rechecking the locks of windows and doors. Perhaps it was just to keep busy for a few more moments that I even rechecked the pads of cardboard with which I had muffled the bell-clappers on both telephone and door chime. I don't seem to have had many callers for several years now, but I had to avoid any chance of being disturbed.

SOMEWHAT calmed by my exertion, I prepared to lie down, but a sentimental whim moved me like an automaton toward the window. It was the only really unreasoning thing I did.

Like a prisoner denied the light on penalty of torture, I knelt down and looked under the blind. Never was the Sun so dazzling. This slightest lifting of the shade poured onto me a warmth that I had never known before.

An old saying, invading my mind, destroyed the illusion, and laughing a bit nervously at "seeking his place in the Sun," I turned away and lay down.

The dials on my new calendar clock registered 3:15, July 12. Reaching for my pad and pencil, I recorded this and then, refolding my hands across my chest, I lay quite still.

The heat of the day had begun to saturate the closed room. Outside, all was quiet, as if the Sun had mesmerized the world. The insect hum of the electric clock was the only clue of life around me.

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Looming large above me in the mirror, the magnified reflection of my face calmed my mind with its placidity. Great-lidded Buddha eyes gazed down, holding in their glow my first understanding of Nirvana.

I knew that it had come. I had reached the boundary where the fear of returnless going stopped the psyche just this side.

My only body consciousness was the heavy *thud . . . thud . . . thud* of blood being driven through my veins. I toyed with stopping the thudding, feeling and savoring the pause between those sledge-hammer strokes on my brain — knowing that any one of those pauses lengthened to eternity was death.

Suddenly I shrieked and sat upright. For an instant, my body had completely stopped and I had known it. Only a nameless grasping fear had snatched me back.

My heart beat wildly as I gasped for air. With shaking hands, I poured a drink and gulped it down. It had been close.

Still trembling, I arose and slumped into a chair. I had to organize myself, to think my way along this thing.

What had happened to me?

This one thing I knew: I *could* do it. I could stop my body at will and I had done it, if only for a second.

This thought reassured me or perhaps the brandy opened my reserve of courage, for I had been sitting in the chair some time.

WITH caution, I approached the pallet. I regarded it with suspicion, as though there were a deadly scorpion in its folds. Then, jeering at my hesitation, I lay down and composed myself as before. The clock said 5:05. I stirred again only to record this on the pad.

Despite my nervousness, things proceeded faster this time. A morbid excitement carried me along the path I now already knew. And at its end, I flirted with the *stopping*. Going over and stepping back, going over and stepping back.

It was a pleasure exquisite and unique. Once felt, it was unresistable.

I was no longer afraid. I did not have to be. I could stop my body and start it at will. So I let it slip away from me. The thuddings ceased and only the pauses remained — silent, shapeless things in endless procession. And then the great silence. It flowed over me and I was lost.

The silence was too heavy and my thoughts were not my own; they floated up away from me in the silence. I could feel them go, but there was nothing to bring them back. Each thought of pro-

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test winged its way into a void with all the rest.

And nothing else remained but the will to live. As the silence lapped around this will, it grew until it alone was I. The silence washed about it, but it stood.

Then the little rippings and the slicings and the tearings and the softening of things were there — heard without sound, felt without feeling, like the pulling of a tooth from a novocaine-deadened jaw.

It was then I saw the face.

Have you ever felt the terror of suddenly waking with a face — a face of eyes — staring into your unguarded and bewildered first glance? One feels as if this face would look into one's very life and wrest it from him. Perhaps it is a nascent fear of one's own mask of death.

But I could not escape the mask. It loomed above me with gaping maw and staring eyes; eyes that seemed more dead and deadly as my vision cleared. The mirror enlarged the horror that lay below it.

It was the wrench of nausea that pulled me from this nightmare. In the violence of the retching, I rolled from beneath the mirror and raised myself to hands and knees. I had knocked over the clock and it shouted up at me — 10:05, July 15. Three days! Too long! Too horribly long!

SLOWLY I dragged myself to the telephone and pulled it from the stand. I remember nothing else until they brought me here.

It's been eight days — eight days away from death, yet I'm closer to it now than ever before. And I can't *think* of it. The fear has come crashing through and I can't *think*.

This thing, this body is too far gone. I won't be able to make it move. I'll just feel it getting away — little by little — ripping apart cell by cell, and then everywhere all at once.

I can feel it now. But in that great silence, I could almost hear the tearing — yet there was no sound.

The doctors have given up all hope. I can see it in their faces. I could hear them talking among themselves when they brought me in. They had to give it a name. There's a certain safety in a name, you know.

I would have told them, but I was afraid they'd laugh. The nurses would laugh and say to each other, "Have you heard what the one in 408 wanted in his case history?"

I couldn't stand the laughter now.

But that's the way my chart should read — Cause of Death: — *Death!*

— MAX TADLOCK

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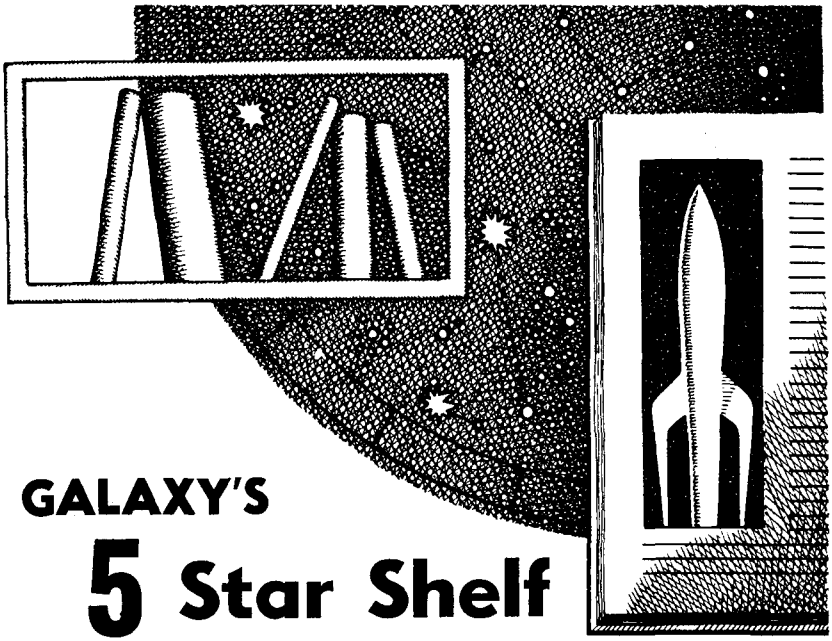

GALAXY'S 5 Star Shelf

THE FITTEST by J. T. McIntosh. Doubleday & Co., $2.95

WHAT happens if Fido and Felix finally realize that they've been bought off with a free meal by mankind for the past few thousand years? The author poses this question by presenting a future in which an experiment goes awry and not one, but four animal groups attain intelligence — mice, rats, cats and dogs.

Having the capacity to reason, these natural mutual enemies realize that Man holds a greater threat to their existence, being the enemy of any competitive life-form.

In this disturbing book, one is uncomfortably reminded of the slender pillars on which our civilization is erected: communication, transport and power. How disruptive would gnawed telephone wires, chewed power-line insulation and glass scattered on busy highways be if they were constant and deliberate acts? As the animal becomes able to compete with Man almost on his own level, Man must adopt animal cunning and brutality in order to survive. The way he does it quick-freezes the blood! I would

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say that Mr. McIntosh has written a Pippin — and that's not just apple-polishing!

POINT ULTIMATE by Jerry Sohl. Rinehart & Company, Inc., $2.75

THE story concerns an America of forty to fifty years hence, thirty years after a successful Communist conquest achieved mainly by the use of germ warfare. The enemy doctors halt the epidemic with pre-prepared vaccine, but it requires monthly booster shots to maintain freedom from relapse, permitting rigid control of the native Americans. It is against this society that Emmet Keyes rebels; his weapon . . . immunity.

I was afraid at this point that I was in for another man-against-the-world thriller-diller, but Mr. Sohl spared us that.

My objection to the book is the caliber of opposition that the hero encounters. I'll go along with us Americans being tough critters to hold down, but could decadence hamstring the enemy in only thirty years after conquest, even with the super-effective booster-shot gimmick that the conquerors could hold over the heads of the conquered?

I still had a pleasant time reading it, though, and judging it as literature would be unfair. Sohl set out to write action and made it.

STAR BRIDGE by Jack Williamson and James E. Gunn. Gnome Press, $3.00

AW, come on now — this is going too far! So help me, this opus starts out with our rangy, raw-boned hero actually astride an old pinto!

Of course he doesn't stay long in the saddle. He's light-years away in pretty quick order, but not before he gets involved in a desperate chase, an assassination, a temporary tie-up with the Director of Communications of the company that owns the whole Galaxy (incidentally a gorgeous tomato), and a weird one-eyed parrot and its owner, a fat little Chinese who (why did you have to do it, fellas?) spouts pidgin English.

After this alarming introduction, which scared me into thinking that another Giles Habibula was being born, Wu, the Chinese, became a pretty interesting character.

None of the others come alive, but, then, who's got time to be a character when there's so much to *do?*

SOLAR LOTTERY by Phillip K. Dick; THE BIG JUMP by Leigh Brackett. Ace Books, 35c

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THE Big Jump is a fine hunk of story about Man's first try for the stars. One of the original crew of five returns, comatose but with body aquiver with a horrid life of its own. A remarkable feeling of horror and mystery is maintained without letdown while the hero attempts to determine first-hand what has happened to the original crew.

It's a big-scale story, but it still manages to make its people human.

Solar Lottery is something else again. It's a longer story and has ten times as much plot, so I guess it should be ten times better than its companion story, but . . .

Anyhow, it concerns a society that is founded on the monstrous descendants of our present industrial giants; a governmental setup that uses "teeps" — telepathic agents; rule-by-chance succession that is determined by lottery and lots, lots more. Too much if you ask me. There's a limit to how many ideas a writer can compress into a story. After that, it's profitless squandering.

TERROR IN THE MODERN VEIN, edited by Donald A. Wollheim. Hanover House, $3.95

THIS volume could be subtitled "Mr. Wollheim Gives Up the Ghost." Says he, "Ghosts is dead." Modern situations and frustrations breed modern terrors. Therefore this ghoulish goulash of modern toupee-raisers.

Most of the stories are good, particularly "The Crowd" by Bradbury and a little shocker, "The Rag Thing" by David Grinell. The two long pieces, "The Croquet Player" by H. G. Wells and "The Burrow" by Franz Kafka are both interesting because of the big names involved. "The Burrow" particularly is a fine psychological fable.

I liked even better the shorter works by Heinlein, Leiber, Sheckley, A. E. Coppard, Matheson and Robert Bloch.

As for "He" by H. P. Lovecraft . . . HA!

PHYSICAL & PSYCHICAL RESEARCH by C. C. L. Gregory and Anita Kohsen. The Omega Press, Surrey, England

THIS English study is not the type of book one ordinarily finds reviewed in these columns, since it is meant for the professional rather than the lay reader. But it is of interest because it has something new to say concerning "psi" powers and theory that appealed to me, as utter an utter layman can be, as a somewhat more productive and scientific approach than the experiments of the Rhine investigators.

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However, it seems to me that the problem of definitive control still remains unsolved in the field of research. The authors strive honestly to overcome this basic fault of all ESP inquiry. They don't succeed, but their attempt may help point the way — *if there is one.*

SPACE CAT VISITS VENUS by Ruthven Todd. Charles Scribner's Sons, $2.00

HERE'S something I've been hoping for — a natural, age group 9 to 12. It doesn't at all just so happen that I have a 9-year-old son, Ricky, and a 12-year-old daughter, Sandy, and I was getting tired of having them around at their present age levels until something came along for them to review.

Ricky: "I enjoyed *Space Cat Visits Venus* very much. The idea of a cat in a space story I think is very unusual! You don't often read about a cat in space. Venus itself was really something! On Venus there was only one type of animal, a sort of mouse. These mice were very important to the plants of Venus. Just like bees to our plants. Venus was really mostly plants that could communicate with each other."

Sandy: "I liked the book. It is about Flyball, a space cat, and Captain Fred Stone's trip to Venus. I liked the fact that the plants were the intelligent beings on Venus and not the animals. Now when I do my gardening, I wonder if perhaps my flowers are talking about me and what they're saying. I hope they like me. I like them."

Well, that's this month's allowance taken care of.

—FLOYD C. GALE

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Warrior's Return

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

Hibbs wasn't the first man to come back from the wars with a chip on his shoulder . . . only his reached from here to Mars!

THE SILVER and blue cross-country bus reached the outskirts of town and slowed.

"Is there any special place you want to get off, sir?" the bus driver asked.

"This will do nicely," Hibbs said.

With great gentleness, the driver braked his enormous vehicle to an imperceptible stop, as though he were transporting nitroglycerin instead of people. The gesture wasn't lost on the passengers.

They recognized it as the driver's mark of respect, his

Illustrated by THOMAS

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genuflection to the famous Mr. Hibbs.

"Is he getting off *here?*"

"Shh! He'll hear you!"

"But why here?"

"This is where he lived before the war."

"And why did he come by bus?"

As the bus came to its imperceptible stop four blocks from the center of town, Hibbs stood up and lifted his worn leather suitcase from the baggage rack. Every man in the bus noticed how tall and stooped and skinny he was, how homely, how tired-looking. They'd be able to tell their friends all about him. And the women made notes of Hibbs' unbecoming steel-rimmed glasses and his cheap, unpressed suit, the coat of which they could estimate within a few dollars.

No one spoke as he gave his ticket stub to the driver.

"It's been a great pleasure having you, Mr. Hibbs," the driver said, operating the door lever. "Ah — Mr. Hibbs, could I ask you a question, sir?"

Hibbs smiled vaguely, pretending he didn't hear. He started down the steps.

The driver said, "Would you mind telling me why you came by bus, sir, instead of the other way?"

Hibbs shook his head and walked down the steps.

"Mr. Hibbs," the driver said, "could I have your autograph? My little boy —"

Hibbs hurried away from the bus.

"Freak!" the driver shouted. The bus roared away.

Hibbs wiped perspiration from his forehead and found that his hands were shaking. He began to walk toward town.

An old pickup truck came by. Lettered on its battered side was *Tommy's Auto Repairs.* The driver slowed, stared at Hibbs and stamped on the gas pedal. The truck picked up speed, its ancient engine knocking furiously. The driver glanced back once, then hunched over the wheel.

Welcome home, Hibbs thought.

THE PICKUP truck screeched to a stop in front of Joe's Bar. Tommy Burke climbed out, glanced up the block and hurried into the bar.

"Hey, guess who's in town!" he yelled.

Joe's Bar resembled a cavern. The dirty windows were forever shuttered and the light that filtered through had a cold, unreal, phosphorescent quality, as though there were no light outside at all. No matter what the time, it was always midnight in Joe's Bar, midnight on the longest night in the year.

The three drinkers had a night

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look, too. Their leaning bodies fitted cunningly against the bar, as though shaped for that purpose. Their feet were intricately twined in the brass rail, in a manner no human feet should assume. They looked like fixtures, like simulated humans that Joe might have bought to keep him company.

"Well, guess who's back in town," Tommy Burke repeated.

The bartender put down his newspaper and said, "Burke, don't come shouting in here like that."

"Give me a beer," Burke said, "and guess who's in town."

"Abraham Lincoln?" hazarded Jim Mathis.

"Alexander the Great?" asked Stan Dearborn.

"Julius Caesar?" said Eddie Fleet.

"Here's your beer," Joe the bartender said.

Burke took a deep gulp and wiped his mouth. "Frank Hibbs is back in town."

"Huh?"

"You're kidding!"

"Hibbs wouldn't come back here!"

"He's here," Burke said.

"Where?"

"Walking down Main Street."

"Walking?" The three men uncoiled their feet from the brass rail, rushed to the door and peered out. They came slowly back to the bar and ordered.

"Another beer."

"Make it two."

"Better give me a shot. It *is* Frank Hibbs!"

At that, Willie Day came out of the men's room. "You say Frank's back?"

"I drove right by him," Burke said.

"So why didn't you stop and give him a lift?" Day asked.

BURKE scratched his head. "I didn't think of it. You don't give Frank Hibbs a lift just like that. What was I supposed to do, stop and say, 'Hop in, Frank,' like he was just anybody? He didn't have to walk if he didn't want to."

"You was scared," the bartender said, winking at the three drinkers.

"I was not!"

"Sure you was — a big, strong boy like you."

"Well, I ain't scared of you," Burke said sullenly, folding his muscular, grease-stained arms across his chest. "You big, flabby meatball."

"No offense," the bartender said, winking again at the drinkers. "So our home-town hero has returned."

"Think he'll show us his medals?" Mathis asked.

"Frank was never no showoff," Willie Day said, looking like a

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fighting rooster with his red-rimmed eyes and bristling gray hair.

"No, not much," Mathis snorted. "Him and his great big brain."

"You can't blame him for being smart," Day argued.

"I reckon we'd of won the war without him."

"Don't be too sure of that," Day said. "Just what you got against him?"

"I hate freaks," Mathis said. "I'd like to boot his tail out of town for him."

"Why don't you try?" asked Day. "You're about twice his size, Jim. Go ahead and you try."

"You can't fight a guy like that," Mathis grumbled. "In a *fair* fight, I could beat him. And I can lick *you* any old time."

"Say, Tommy," the bartender broke in, "what was Hibbs wearing?"

"Business suit," Burke said, puzzled.

"Did he have on a hat?"

"I don't think so. Why?"

"I kinda thought he might be wearing a Buck Rogers space helmet," Joe answered.

Everyone except Willie Day roared with laughter.

"I don't like it," Stan Dearborn said. "Whenever Hibbs is here, someone gets hurt. I think we should ask him politely to leave town. We could get up a deputation —"

"You're forgetting something," Eddie Fleet interrupted, with a subtle smile.

"What's that?"

"Frank Hibbs can make us rich. You know that, don't you?" He waited until the drinkers had nodded. Then he said, "Tommy, go out and buy a *New York Times*. I'll show you what I mean."

HIBBS COULD see that the town hadn't changed much. Joe's Bar was as dingy as ever, with the blackout shutters still drawn. Eddie Fleet's hardware store still had machine-gun marks in one wall, from the time the Russian plane, miles from its target, had strafed everything in sight until a Matador brought it down. Stan Dearborn's shoe store had a new sign and someone had opened a dry-cleaning shop. But Mrs. Ganz's boarding house was still there and Taylor's cigar store still had posters of the high school football schedule.

He walked into the cigar store. Mrs. Taylor was behind the counter, reading a mystery magazine. She blinked at him through her bifocals and cried. "My goodness! Frank Hibbs!"

"Yes, ma'am," Hibbs said. "Could I have two packs of Luckies?"

Mrs. Taylor just stared at him. "Are you back for good, Frank?"

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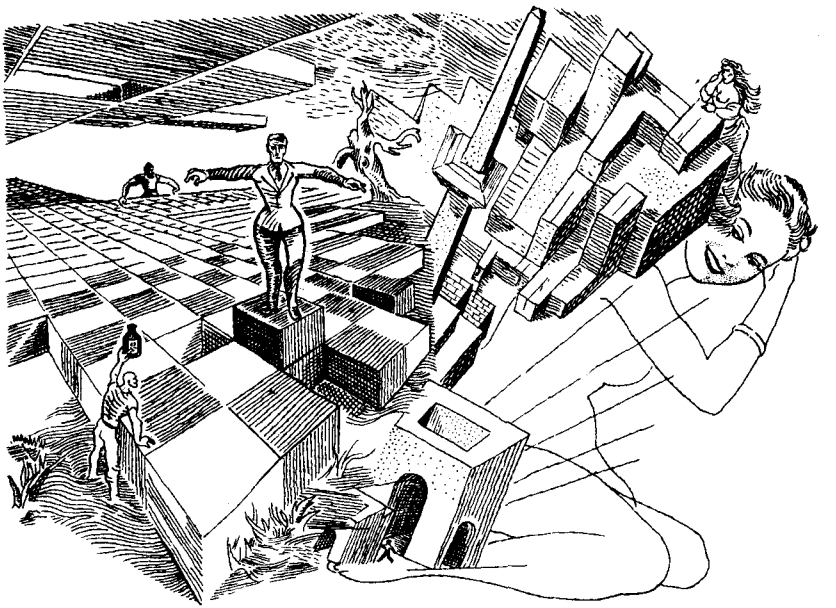

"Yes, ma'am. I guess I'm going to stay."

"Oh, Frank, we've been so proud of you, most of us. We read all about you in the newspapers. Imagine a boy from our little town becoming famous!"

"Well, it's all over," Hibbs said. "I'd rather not talk about it."

"I don't blame you. It must have been a frightful experience. But I always said you were an unusual boy. Do you remember how I always spoke up for you after your poor parents died?"

Hibbs smiled faintly. "Yes, of course, Mrs. Taylor. How is Danny?"

"Danny is dead. My poor boy was killed in that big battle they had around Port Arthur. *He* was just an ordinary soldier."

"I'm very sorry to hear it."

"*He* was on an actual battlefield," Mrs. Taylor said, "carrying an actual *weapon*. No generals tried to protect Danny."

"Could I have the Luckies?" Hibbs asked.

Mrs. Taylor took out two packs and held them absentmindedly in her hand. "Well, I

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guess everyone did what they could. I always spoke up for you, Frank, you know that. I never let anyone call you a freak in *my* presence. Why, the main reason they didn't commit you that time was because of my say-so. And you've certainly showed them."

"I'm very tired, Mrs. Taylor," Hibbs said. "I'd love to talk some other time, but right now —"

"Frank," Mrs. Taylor cut in, "I hate to ask you this on your first day home, but —"

Hibbs held out his hand for the cigarettes. Reluctantly Mrs. Taylor gave them to him and accepted half a dollar.

"Please listen to me, Frank. I'm only asking because you and Danny were such friends and I always stuck up for you. They raised the taxes again on that little tiny country place of mine and it's all Joe Walsh's fault. If you spoke to him, Frank — you wouldn't even have to threaten, just one firm word out of you —"

Hibbs hurried out of the store. Mrs. Taylor followed a few steps.

"Well, perhaps after you've rested," she added urgently. "I know you won't forget your old friends. Frank, why didn't you wear your uniform? Your newspaper pictures were so handsome with the uniform. Why didn't you wear it?"

"That uniform was a joke," Hibbs said bitterly. "I was no soldier."

He walked across the street to Mrs. Ganz's boarding house.

WITHIN the dim and cavernous recesses of Joe's Bar, the drinkers had gathered around a two-day-old copy of the *New York Times*, spread out full on the bar. They had opened it to the financial section.

"Do you really think he can do it?" Dearborn asked.

"Of course he can," Eddie Fleet said.

"But will he?"

"Why not?" Fleet wanted to know. "We're his friends, aren't we? Look, we buy him a couple drinks, we talk about high school days, then we ask him to have a look at these stock market things. He looks, right? Hibbs was always crazy about numbers. And we're his friends, right?"

"Fine friends," Willie Day said.

"And then we ask him which stocks are going up. It's as simple as that. All he has to do is say, 'Minnesota Mining' or 'Dakota Uranium.' A couple of words!"

"All he has to do is point," the bartender said. "He don't have to speak at all if he don't want to."

"He'll never do it," Day insisted.

"Two minutes of his valuable time, that's all it'll take," Fleet

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said. "How in hell can he say no?"

Jim Mathis shook his head. "But are you really sure he'll know? Even those electric brain things they got in Washington and Harvard can't do that."

"They can, too," Tommy Burke argued.

"If they can," Mathis asked, "how come those professors ain't rich? Answer me that one!"

"Look," the bartender said, "Frank can outthink those machines. He did it during the war, the early part, before they found out what else he could do."

"He won't do it," Willie Day told them. "Look, a million people must have asked him for favors by now. *Everybody* knows what he can do."

"But this is his home town," Fleet said. "This is different. He wants to live here. He wants us to say what a wonderful job he did. That's what he wants. That's why he came back."

Day shook his head emphatically. "Frank came back because he doesn't have any other place to go. I guess he's about the most famous man in the country now. People won't leave him alone. I think he hoped he could find a little peace and quiet here."

"In that case, he didn't think very good with that great big brain of his," Mathis said.

"Come on," Fleet said, folding the *Times*. "Let's hunt him up. It's worth a try."

Stan Dearborn said, "Hey, let's take along a fifth. Maybe we can soften him up with a drink or two."

"Good idea."

"A fifth of the best, Joe."

"Who's going to pay for it?" the bartender demanded.

"We'll chip in. We're all in this, aren't we?"

"I guess so," the bartender admitted. He slipped a bottle into a brown paper bag. "Coming, Willie?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you guys are crazy. You go up to Frank like that, there's going to be trouble. Someone's going to get hurt."

"You're just chicken, Willie," Burke said.

MARIE GANZ had seen Hibbs enter town and had just had time to change into a freshly pressed cotton dress, brush her hair and touch up her lipstick. She opened the front door of the boarding house for him.

"Well, Frank!"

"Hello, Marie," Hibbs said. "How are you?"

"Fine," Marie replied. "I guess I've grown up a little since you were here last."

"Yes, you have. You were a pretty little girl then . . ."

"And now?"

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"You're a pretty woman." Hibbs coughed nervously. "Is your mother here?"

"She's in the hospital," Marie said. "Her stomach again."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"But she kept your room all through the war, just like you asked. And I cleaned and dusted it every day. It's just the way you left it."

"That's fine," Hibbs said. "I think I'll go up now."

But he hesitated. Marie was half blocking the doorway. He would have to brush past her to enter the boarding house.

"The sheets are clean and fresh," Marie said. "And I made sure nothing was ever moved."

"Thank you," Hibbs said.

"I know how you feel about your personal things. I wouldn't of *let* anyone touch them."

"Well, thanks."

"You look tired, Frank. You ought to have some fun, now that you're back. Go out dancing and things."

"Would you like to go dancing with me?" Hibbs asked.

"Sure. I'd love to, Frank."

"You wouldn't feel — strange, being seen out with me?"

"Of course not, silly!"

THERE WAS an awkward silence. Then Marie asked, "What are you going to do now, Frankie?"

"Nothing much," Hibbs said. "A little painting . . ."

"Painting? You?"

"Most definitely me."

"But, Frank, you could make millions!"

"I'm just going to do a little painting."

"I guess you can afford to," Marie said. "They must of paid you well in the war. I'll bet you got more than those generals. You should of, after all you did!"

Hibbs smiled vaguely, brushed past her and slowly started up the stairs.

Marie said, "Frank —"

"Yes, Marie?"

"I hate to bother you at a time like this. I hate to ask anything of you —"

"Later, perhaps," Hibbs said moving up the stairs. Hurriedly, this time.

"Frank, it's Mother's stomach. I don't think the hospital is doing her any good. And it costs so much! It's unbelievable how much it costs."

"The doctors know what they're doing," Hibbs said.

"Wouldn't you cure her, Frank?"

Hibbs turned on the stairs. "I can't do anything like that."

"I know you can," Marie said. "You cured Mother's tumor that time. I know she wasn't supposed to tell anyone, but I *am* her daughter."

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"I'm through! I'm through with all that. I'm just an ordinary human being now. I'm going to be a painter —"

"Oh, Frank," Marie begged, "you could just flick your fingers and it'd be done."

"Don't you understand? I can't arbitrate. I can't pick and choose. If I give to one, I must give to all. And I can't give to all. I did what everybody asked me once, but now I'm sick of being different. I'm my own man now and I want to be like everyone else!"

"You won't do it? A little thing like that?"

"I can't!"

"I shouldn't think it would disturb you so much." Marie said. "After what *you* did."

Hibbs had turned pale. He stared at Marie.

"Oh, you can kill, kill, kill, if someone important asks you to. But you won't cure one little sickness. Well, I wouldn't be seen out with a freak like you." Marie was shouting now.

Hibbs walked slowly down the stairs, toward the front door.

Marie said, "I'm sorry, Frank. I shouldn't have said that. It just slipped out."

Hibbs opened the door.

"Will you come back? I don't really think you're a freak, Frankie —"

Hibbs closed the door behind him.

HE SAT ON A bench in the town's little park. Two boys came over and stared at him.

"Hey, you're Hibbs, aren't you?"

"Sure, he's the guy. Hey, Mr. Hibbs, what did it feel like in space?"

"Lonely," Hibbs said.

"Was it hot or cold?"

"Neither."

"How long did you stay?"

"Not long. It was exploratory."

"How did you breathe?"

Hibbs didn't answer.

"Bro-*ther!* What was it like on Mars?"

"Lonely."

"Boy! Hey, how about doing a trick for us?"

"Yeah, show us some of your stuff. Come one!"

Hibbs rubbed his eyes.

"C'mon, mister. *Do* something!"

The drinkers from Joe's Bar came up in a compact group, blinking in the sunlight.

"You kids scram," said Fleet. "Go on, scram. Hiya, Frankie."

"Hello, Eddie," Hibbs said.

"You remember all the boys, don't you?"

"Sure," Hibbs said. "Hello, Joe, Jim, Stan — I don't believe I know this gentleman."

"I'm Tommy Burke. I was a couple years behind you in school. But I remember *you,* Mr. Hibbs."

"Sure has been a long time

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since high school days," Jim Mathis said. "Boy! Remember those days, Frank?"

"I remember them," said Hibbs.

"We was all great pals then," Joe said.

Hibbs smiled.

"Oh, sure," Dearborn said, "we razzed you a little, Frank, because you were different. But we really did like you."

"That's a fact," Fleet added. "No friends like the boyhood friends, eh, Frankie?"

"I guess that's true," Hibbs agreed.

"Things were always lively when you were here, Frankie. That time you burned down old man Thompson's shed. What did you call it?"

"Poltergeist manifestation," answered Hibbs.

"Yeah! They almost put you away, huh? But you showed 'em all. All those profs at Harvard and Duke — then the top Army brass — you showed 'em!"

"I should have kept my mouth shut," Hibbs said. "I was an idiot."

"How about a drink for old times' sake?" Joe asked, taking a bottle out of a brown paper bag.

"Thanks, but I can't drink," Hibbs said. "My metabolic make-up . . ."

"That's okay, Frankie. We'll drink to you. Here's to Frankie Hibbs, the hometown boy who made good." Joe opened the bottle and drank, and passed it around.

EDDIE FLEET rustled his newspaper.

"Say, Frankie," Jim Mathis said, "You were always a hotshot with numbers, weren't you?"

Hibbs didn't answer.

"Well," Mathis went on, "me and the boys have been thinking of taking a little flyer on Dakota Uranium. Here it is here." He pushed the newspaper at Hibbs. "What do you think, Frankie?"

"It's a highly speculative stock," Hibbs said, not looking at the newspaper. "I wouldn't, if I were you."

"Yeah? Well, thanks a lot, Frank. That saves us some money right there. What stock do you think we should buy?"

"I don't know," Hibbs said.

"Sure you do," said Fleet. "We read in the papers about how you could predict any individual stock, if you wanted to. You worked it all out for fun once. Just a matter of understanding the stock market cycle, you told the reporters."

"I can't tell you," Hibbs said. "You can see that, can't you? If I tell one person, I'd have to tell —"

"Don't hand us that, Frankie," Mathis said.

"I won't do it," Hibbs said. "When I was younger, I didn't

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mind doing things for people. I got a kick out of it, enjoyed it. I didn't think it would turn out this way. I liked being different then, but it has to stop now. I'm the only one of my kind and there's no place for me."

"You mean you won't help us out?" Eddie Fleet asked.

"Can't you see my position?" Hibbs pleaded.

"You won't help out your old friends," Dearborn said sadly.

"I can't!"

They turned to go. Mathis murmured softly, "Dirty freak."

Hibbs stood up. "What did you say?"

"Nothing," Mathis said.

"Go on, say it."

"All right then, I will," Mathis said. "You're a freak, a dirty freak. And you're a murderer, too. How many of them did you kill, Frankie, sitting in your office in Washington and *thinking?* A million, two million? You aren't human!"

"You're right," Hibbs said, "I'm not really human. I'm a sport, the only one of my kind, absolutely unique and unduplicatable. And all of you envy me and hate me, but you still have to ask favors of me. Like a fool, I did what you asked during the war, because I thought you were my people. But you'll never leave me alone, will you? You'll never forgive me."

"Don't get excited, Frankie," Fleet said, taking a step back.

"I'm not excited. I'm hopelessly tired and lost. Where can I go? What can I do? It's the same everywhere. 'Do this for me, Mr. Hibbs, do that, Mr. Hibbs. Perform this tiny miracle for me, Mr. Hibbs.' And if I don't — 'You dirty freak, Mr. Hibbs.' You want miracles? You *really* want to see miracles?"

"Take it easy, Frankie," the bartender said.

"Sure, I'll give you miracles!" Hibbs told them. "Want to see me fly?" Abruptly he levitated himself fifty feet into the air and came down again. "That's how I went into space. Want to see me make fire?"

"Frank, please!"

FIRE LEAPED from Hibbs' fingertips, scorching the ground in front of them. They turned to run and suddenly found themselves surrounded by a roaring circle of flames.

"That's how I make fire!" Hibbs shouted. "What other little exhibitions would you like? Teleportation?"

Mathis and Fleet were suddenly lifted off their feet and hurled to the ground. They scrambled up, ashen white, gasping, hands over their faces to shield them from the circle of flame.

"What else can I do for you?"

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cried Hibbs. "I'm practically unlimited, you know, a real, genuine superman. Maybe you'd like to see how I control supersonics? Shall I level this town for you, as I leveled Stalingrad? Or maybe you want to know what really happened to the Russian Fourth Army? I'll show you!"

A blackness formed over the heads of the men, expanded, grew, began to envelop them.

"Frank!" Mathis yelled, running into the street. "For God's sake, Frank!"

The blackness disappeared. The flames vanished.

"All right," Hibbs said, and levitated. "I'm going. To hell with you and your lousy race."

"Damn him!" grated Dearborn. "He might have killed us!"

"I knew there'd be trouble," Mathis said. "He isn't even human."

"But where's he going now?" asked Tommy Burke.

"Mars, Venus, the Moon — who cares?" Dearborn said. "Wherever he goes, he'll be alone. Superman — he can have it!"

The figure of Frank Hibbs, two hundred feet in the air, hesitated, stopped, came down alongside Willie Day. Hibbs looked puzzled. Day was sitting on the ground with his arms on his knees and he had a sad, pitying expression.

"You didn't run," said Hibbs.

"No," Willie Day said.

"You weren't afraid I might hurt you, even kill you?"

"Not really."

"Why?" asked Hibbs, bewildered. "Ive done more killing than any one man in history. Why did you think I'd stop at another?"

Day gave his head a single shake. The pitying look never left his face. "They were the enemy. You knew what they stood for and you were right in hating them. You knew I didn't want anything like that, so you wouldn't kill or even hurt me. And there's something else . . ."

"What?" demanded Hibbs.

"You're human. Maybe another step up, but human all the same. And you've been made to think you're a computer. I guess you are in a lot of ways, but there's one thing you didn't compute."

HIBBS SAT down beside him. "What's that?"

"You're not the only one with a special talent. There are plenty of people like that — scientists, artists, mechanics, gardeners with green thumbs."

"So?" Hibbs prompted.

"You think you can't help anybody if you can't help everybody. Does a surgeon figure that way? Does a green-thumb gardener refuse to work because he can't take care of everybody's garden?"

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Hibbs was silent for a long while as the other men slowly came back from the street. "I hadn't thought —" he began, and stopped. He turned sharply on Willie Day. "Softsoap! You're after something! What is it?"

"Nothing," said Day. "For myself, that is. For you."

"You're crazy. What could I want that I can't do?"

"Stop thinking of yourself as a freak. You can't do that alone. You need help. All right, you've got friends right here in town who can help."

Hibbs stared around at the others. They nodded sheepishly.

"What about a — a drink?" Tommy Burke invited.

"You know something?" said Hibbs. "I've never had one with the boys. I'd — well, I can't think of anything I'd like better."

Day got up and brushed himself off. "Why not?" he asked. "You're only human."

—ROBERT SHECKLEY

FORECAST

Next month, James H. Schmitz's serial THE TIES OF EARTH concludes in a way that not enough stories manage to achieve — it leaves you wishing it hadn't ended. But the problem has been tinglingly established, the clues given and hunted down, the danger encountered in all its ferocity, the tangled ties of Earth snaked through or cut — and where can a story go from there except to its exciting conclusion? But one still can't help wishing . . .

Oh, well, there's the consolation of Alan E. Nourse's BRIGHTSIDE CROSSING, a novelet of a dreadful adventure that can't possibly succeed — and yet must be undertaken. History is full of such necessary doomed exploits. The oddity is that so many of them escaped inevitable catastrophe and did what they set out to do. But can this one? When you read the frightening roster of perils and balance it against the few things in favor of winning, we guarantee you won't rush to the $100 window to lay down a bet that the story ends happily. And don't construe this to mean it does — or doesn't. Just wait and see, and then think whether you'd have done the same as the men who had to go along. Chances are that you would; some jobs have to be done, no matter what the risk.

Another novelet to go with THE TIES OF EARTH and BRIGHTSIDE CROSSING? It's almost for sure, only a matter of what can be squeezed into the issue without elbowing out the lineup of short stories, Willy Ley's FOR YOUR INFORMATION and our regular features.

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With Redfern on Capella XII

Take Redfern's advice and do not get mixed up with fearless people cast in the heroic mold . . . they can really put on the squeeze!

BY CHARLES SATTERFIELD

IT WASN'T a pillory, exactly, but it served a pillory's purpose. "For God's sake!" Redfern yelled. "Careful with that bear trap!"

His Fnit torturers didn't speak English, but they understood what Redfern was communicating in a writhing scream. They chattered at each other like crickets on a summer night and eventually took away the toothed, spring-clamped, murderous-looking trap and replaced it with coils of wire, with which they bound him to the frame. The wire was tight, but not, Redfern assured himself consolingly, as tight as the trap would have been on his legs and neck.

Illustrated by ASHMAN

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Next came the tar. At least it looked like tar and served tar's purpose, though it smelled like a swamp at low water. "Ouch!" roared Redfern; it was hot. Then the flaky pumice grit, for unfortunately the Fnits had no feathers — unfortunately for Redfern, that is; the pumice had a way of rubbing him raw that feathers could never have matched.

Then the Fnits chattered at each other for a moment thoughtfully and finally left him alone.

It was time for them to gather faggots for the blaze.

REDFERN squinted over his shoulder at Capella, slowly drifting toward the horizon behind him. He had about an hour before sundown. It all depended on whether or not they found enough burnable wood before dark. The insect-legged Fnits were strictly daylight animals; when their planet got cold at night, they were tunneled in their warm, damp cities underground.

Capella XII was not a very fertile planet, at least not this far north, and there might be much suitable wood within easy carrying distance, Redfern told himself. There weren't any big trees at all; he could see that for himself. And that was pretty hopeful. Why, it was ten minutes already and the fuel-gatherers weren't back yet, not even with the first load. His chances of lasting past the sunset, he calculated shrewdly, were at least five or six to one, and that meant that he would live until morning — of course, if he didn't freeze during the night.

Fourteen hours! It seemed like forever.

Someone coughed behind him. "Pardon me," said a voice — a human voice! "Would you be interested in a job?"

Redfern jerked against the cables. "Who — who the devil are you?" he demanded, craning to see.

A man stepped apprehensively out from behind the pillory. "My name," he said swiftly, staring about, "is Di Candia. My, ah, associates and I noticed that you appeared to be in difficulties and we thought that you might —"

"Tell me later!" Redfern snapped. "Get me down off here befort the Fnits come back!"

"Surely," said the man agreeably. "However, I should warn you that the pay might be, well, uncertain, since ours is a speculative —"

"Di Candia," begged Redfern, "cut me *down!*"

THEY SPENT the night in a cave on the mountainside, where Redfern slept more joyously than he had slept in years. At daybreak, the man named Di

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Candia nudged Redfern awake. "We might as well get started," he said cheerfully. "It's a long way into the city —"

"Not yet," objected Redfern. "The Fnits will be sniffing around after me like dogs in a garbage dump. Give them a chance to get discouraged."

"Oh, do you think that's necessary?" Di Candia blinked at him thoughtfully. "Well, I suppose you know best. After all —" he nudged Redfern jovially — "you're our expert on Fnits, and if we can't take your advice, what are we paying for?"

Redfern nodded. "Exactly," he said. "What *are* you paying me for?"

"Oh, it's a simple task, Mr. Redfern. My, ah, associates and I have business here on Capella XII. We need someone familiar with the local customs."

Redfern said sourly, "That's me, all right. If I were any more familiar with the customs, I'd be dead. Are these your associates?"

"All but one." Di Candia made the introductions. "General Glick." A red-faced man, ostensible age about fifty, though it was hard to tell these days. "Mr. Cowper." A pale-faced stripling. "And Miss Garney, who is not present. We represent a, well, syndicate which is anxious to do business on this planet."

"You never will," said Redfern positively. "The Fnits don't like humans. They won't have any business dealings."

"We happen to think they will. After all, they tolerated you for nearly a year."

Redfern sighed. "They tolerated me as long as I stuck to my spaceship. But the first time I wandered into town, they grabbed me."

"Because you were in the harem of the Glow," Di Candia supplied.

Redfern looked at him thoughtfully. "Been keeping an eye on things, haven't you? Well, yes, I was. But how was I to know? The Fnits ignored me; I walked into a building; it turned out to be the wrong building. Next thing I knew, I was on the mountainside."

"But nevertheless," General Glick cut in ponderously, "you were there, my boy. Were you not?"

"I was."

"And you can go there again?"

"I can. I won't."

The general looked helplessly at Di Candia, who said smoothly: "Not even for transportation off Capella XII? Not even if the alternative is going back to the stocks?"

Redfern looked unbelievingly at Di Candia. "What the devil do you want with the Glow's harem? Take it from me, you

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wouldn't be interested!"

"That," said Di Candia, "is our problem. You take us there; we do the rest."

SEVERAL HOURS later, the party was toiling toward the Fnit city. The general was in the lead, puffingly reminiscing. "It was on just such a morning as this," he said to the party at large, "that I shot thirty and a half couple of snipe before breakfast on Glencouley. The wind was from the southeast, perhaps a touch east, and I looked like being high gun until —"

"Please, General," said Di Candia. "We'll attract attention." They were only fifty yards from the Fnit highway, across a rise; they could hear the clatter of unicycles streaming along it.

"Time for a break," said Cowper — almost his first words since Redfern had joined the party. Without discussion, Di Candia and the general stopped in their tracks and sat down.

Redfern leaned against a boulder and lit a cigarette, sweltering. Capella itself was a billion miles away, farther than Saturn from Sol, but it was hot under the fur hoods. All of them were thirty or forty pounds heavier because Capella XII's gravity was twenty per cent or so higher than Earth's; walking was hard work.

Redfern debated casting off the furry parka, but it was important to keep his face shielded as much as possible in case a Fnit should notice them and recognize the late prisoner of the pillory. Of course, with not more than a couple of dozen humans on the whole planet, it wouldn't be much of a feat to track him down, but the Fnits were strange — they didn't show much disposition toward method. They would be as likely as not to ignore the humans, unless they happened to see Redfern himself.

General Glick sighed heavily. "Lunch looks like being late," he mentioned, scowling with the effort of thought. "Could do with a bit of it, too."

"We'll eat when we get back to the ship," said Di Candia harshly. The general looked bleak and frustrated.

Redfern shut his mouth like a prudent man. His new employers were an odd lot, but, as they had pointed out, he was in no position to be choosy. He sighed and flipped his cigarette away. The Fnit planet had seemed like such a good idea, back on Earth. Newly discovered, virgin territory for commercial exploitation, it had looked like the perfect way to recoup fortunes for a man with a spaceship and no ties.

No doubt the, ah, syndicate had felt much the same; but Red-

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fern could predict no glowing future for them. His own experience was distinctly negative. First the months and months of trying to get the Fnits to pay attention to him; then the unfortunate incident when they did.

Of course, he was a loner and these people numbered at least four. Perhaps they were better equipped; certainly they appeared to be better financed.

THEIR SHIP proved that, when they got to it. It was a monster, for a private vessel, thrice the size of Redfern's ancient blowtorch. It had the look of a Navy rocket, outmoded and sold to civilians with political pull. But even with pull, the Navy's castoffs don't come cheap, and the fuel bill for any rocket capable of carting tons of payload around space is a big item in anybody's budget book.

Redfern's practiced eye took in the ship's fittings — Golightly converter for faster-than-light flight, self-contained atmosphere regenerator, even that unqualified luxury, a radio communications set, utterly useless except when within orbiting range of an inhabited planet because of the torpor of radio-wave speed. In the ledger of his mind, the total was astonishing.

The fifth member of the party, the Miss Garney, joined them at the ship. She was, by Redfern's estimate, the most utterly gorgeous piece of femininity a gracious Maker ever put on a planet. She came into the ship's lock like Aphrodite emerging from the waves, and Redfern's adrenals buckled down to heavy-duty pumping.

She said meekly, "Things are coming along. My Fnit contact —"

"Miss Garney!" thundered Di Candia. He looked meaningfully at Redfern and said, "Step into the pilot-chamber with me and report. I don't want to have to caution you about security again."

Redfern stared after them. It was a moment before he noticed that his fists were clenched and his whole body in a position of combat.

He looked dazedly at young Cowper and the general. Cowper was playing an intricate form of six-deck solitaire and the general was relaxed in a plush armchair, holding a brandy-and-splash, obviously dreaming of keepered moors and screamers against a rainy wind. Were they men or mice, Redfern demanded furiously of himself, that they could stand silent while a crude, rude oaf like Di Candia browbeat so lovely a thing as Miss Garney?

And what was she doing along on a job like this, anyway? Back on Earth was where she belonged,

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with Titans of industry and the crowned heads of South America fighting to drink champagne from her slipper; back on the TV screens of the world, or the front pages of the newspapers. Not in an out-of-the-way planet of a God-forsaken star, where the entire human population could nearly be counted on the fingers and toes and the non-human population had no eye for mammalian beauty.

Put a name to it: Redfern was, just like that, in love.

HE FELT like a fool in the false Santa Claus beard, but Miss Garney had insisted on it.

"According to my Fnit contact," she said in a voice like the chiming of mellow gongs, "they think of you as Warm Blood with Freckles. They'll *never* think of spotting you under a false beard, particularly if we dye your hair."

Redfern was less positive, but if Miss. Garney wanted it that way, that was the way it would be. Besides, it meant just the two of them going into the Fnit city alone — except, of course, for the Fnits, which hardly counted as competition.

They took the long serpentine tunnel down into the Fnit city, lit with pale greenish fire from the rock ceiling, and walked unnoticed through the scurrying Fnits.

If you've seen one Fnit, you've seen them all: insect-legged, human-sized, heads like moldy skulls. They could learn to speak English, in a way — a few of them had, when the first exploring spacer roared down. But few of them bothered, and no human had ever learned to speak Fnit. The Fnits didn't bother about their human and other extrastellar visitors at all, as a matter of fact. Live and let live was their motto — until one of their uninvited guests crossed the sharp and invisible line of taboo. Then they crossed out the "let live" part of the motto and began gathering faggots.

Redfern, remembering, loosened his collar. "Let's get this over with," he whispered to Miss Garney.

"They don't understand you," she said conversationally, with a mellow, sympathetic smile. "Don't worry. Where did you say the harem was?"

Redfern said rebelliously: "That's your word, not mine. All I know is that it belongs to the chief, what they call the Glow of All the Fnits, and they grabbed me when I walked in."

"It's the harem," Miss Garney said sunnily. "Trust my — contact for that."

"How did you make a contact?" Redfern demanded. "Heaven knows, I tried for a year and

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they wouldn't give me a tumble."

"Oh, that was Sir Vivian's work."

"Sir Vivian?"

"Major-General Sir Vivian Mowgli-Glick. You wouldn't think it to look at him, but he's quite an expert at making contact with, well, native races. Learned it in India."

REDFERN stared at her. He had been in India; in Cawnpore, where the steel mills belched smoke and fire day and night; in Madras, where the big TV studios provided entertainment for the whole world; on the Bengali coast, where the casinos attracted the idle rich of the whole Solar System.

"In India?" he asked.

"Some time ago," she explained. "The general is older than he appears."

"He'd have to be." That was one of the troubles with life these days, Redfern grumbled to himself. Six months in the rejuvenating clinic and an octogenarian came out as young-looking as he liked.

Naturally, the biochemists were careful to call it a "cosmetic change," for they didn't really make a man younger. They only restored the elasticity of the skin with hormone injections, shored up the crumbling bone structure with chelate ion-exchange, then patched up worn organs and spruced up useful ones, drained the accumulated poisons from the brain and nervous system, generally tightened up the loose neuronic connections and refurbished ancient joints. Of course, age left its marks. A man of 200 could never be the man he'd been at 150, but — "cosmetic change!"

It was like jacking up the rotor-cap on a senile Model-J copter and rolling a 2088 Super-Jetmaster underneath it.

Figure it out: It was late Nineteenth Century or so when anyone could call the Indians a "native race," which meant that the general must have been nearly a hundred when the rejuvenation clinics opened up. Which would make him —

"Older than hell," growled Redfern. He himself was a good fifty years from his first rejuvenation, which accounted for some of his prejudices. Like most juniors, he rather resented the clinics. Without them, the world wouldn't be bulging as precariously at is was, the drive into interstellar space wouldn't be as urgent . . . and people like Redfern wouldn't find themselves pilloried by black-shelled monsters like the Fnits.

Miss Garney was explaining: "— brought along a stock of beads and baubles and so on. Trade goods, you know. But Sir

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Vivian found out something that's been very useful, Mr. Redfern. Sugar. The Fnits are fond of it. Oh, not to eat, of course — I suppose it would poison them or turn them green or something. But they make a sticky syrup and cement the cracks in their shells. They never get wet, so —"

"There it is," hissed Redfern, jerking his chin at a sphincter-shaped doorway. "That's where they grabbed me. The harem."

"Oh!" she squealed. "Lovely. It's just lovely, Mr. Redfern!"

To Redfern, it looked like any other Fnit dwelling, only bigger. The honeycombed rock passages of the Fnit city were not constructed for sweeping views. One entrance looked much like any other entrance, apart from minor differences in design. The essential difference in design between this and any other was the lounging pair of Fnits at the entrance; to Redfern, the last time he had come this way, it had seemed they might be doormen to a public building. It had taken only a few seconds to find out they were guards.

MISS GARNEY was making careful notes in a little book. "— three, four, five, sixth entrance down from that public drink fountain or whatever it is," she counted. "Sort of hexagonal sign over the entrance. Good." She closed the notebook and smiled meltingly at her escort. "The general won't have much trouble locating it. Now we've got a couple of hours to kill. Would you like to look around the town?"

Something was bothering Redfern. "Why would the general want to locate it?" he asked uneasily.

"Oh, I don't know." Miss Garney looked charmingly vague. "Something about trade relations — he really doesn't tell me much. Oh, Mr. Redfern, what a charming sight! Let's go look at it!"

The "charming view" was the Fnit equivalent of a kiddies' swimming pool, a sort of dusty sandbox, where soft-shelled little Fnits, just past the larval stage, rolled around and threw dust in the air and chattered to each other. But Redfern wasn't bored; he had a charming sight of his own to look at.

While Miss Garney was touring the Fnit city, Redfern was admiring the lovely way her head sat on her neck, and the remarkable grace with which her supple fingers scratched the end of her thin, lovely nose. He thought dazedly of his library of pinups, the telestars and S-girls, back in the ship; but they blurred and grayed in his memory in comparison with Miss Garney. He didn't even know her first name!

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But his adrenals whispered it to his central nervous system and his pounding heart agreed it was true: "She's beautiful!"

By the time they got back to the ship, Redfern was hinting broadly about cottages and wedding rings. But he stopped short as they approached the ship.

"Good Lord," he said, turning white. "They've found out where I am!"

The base of the ship was ringed with Fnits, a dozen of them, chittering violently at each other.

Miss Garney patted his arm. "Don't worry," she soothed. "It's time for their handout. The general usually takes care of it. It gives him pleasure."

AND THAT was what it was, because as they drew near, the baselock opened and General Sir Vivian Mowgli-Glick stood beaming in the hatch, a carton in one hand. "Here, sir!" he commanded, and tossed little white envelopes of sugar at the Fnits. "Yours, sir. No, no, you with the red collar — you've had your share, I say!"

Redfern and the girl pushed their way through the Fnits into the ship. The general, with one last scattering toss of sugar, followed.

"Dirty little beggars," he said with satisfaction. "Reminds me of the Dogras in Srinagar. It was the Fifty-third Rifles at the time and we'd just come up from the Vale. Bless me, I was only —"

"Shut up," said Cowper from behind his everlasting solitaire. "Did you find the place, Miss Garney?"

The girl nodded. "Mr. Redfern was most helpful." She smiled at Redfern.

"All right," said Cowper, and slammed the cards down on the table. "Let's go. Glick, Di Candia — you come with me. Garney, entertain our associate here. We won't be long."

And they left. Redfern looked warily at the girl.

"Well," she said brightly, "would you like a cup of tea?"

Redfern cleared his throat. "Uh, how long will they, well, be gone?" he asked. "I mean —"

She laughed. "I know what you mean. Have some tea." She opened the galley and expertly drew hot water into a pot. "The general's idea," she said over her shoulder. "He cannot abide instant tea; he insists on tea leaves and a pot. It makes quite a spectacle in free-fall."

It was at least half an hour, Redfern was thinking, to the Fnit city, and half an hour back. So, assume they would take at least half an hour in the city to do whatever they were going to do, that meant ninety minutes. He glanced at the girl thoughtfully,

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estimating her powers of resistance. Of course, that was always assuming they were really going to the Fnit city; but it had to be that —

Miss Garney said: "You rocket jockeys, you're all alike." She picked up the pot of scalding water meaningfully and marched to the table. "Tea," she said in a voice of command, shoving Cowper's solitaire cards out of the way.

Redfern scratched his ear and sat at the table. It wasn't the first time he had made a faulty first approach to a landing and had to abort and come in again.

The girl peeked under the lid of the teapot, nodded, and poured. "Now," she said firmly, "we'll have a pleasant chat, won't we? How did you happen to be on Capella Twelve, Mr. Redfern?"

HE SLID HIS chair around closer to her. "Well, it's like anything else. Dad ran a fleet of charter ships — all rockets, you know, just local stuff. Then the Golightly drive came along and nobody wanted a ship that couldn't make it past Saturn. Dad went to the bank and got the money to refit the ships, but the bank was smarter than he was and they wound up with the ships, all but one. So we heard about the big opportunities out around here and I came out to look for them. I'm still looking. Did anyone tell you that your eyes are the exact color of —"

"That's very interesting," she said, moving away. "And your family is still on Earth?"

"Oh, I never had any family," said Redfern, absent-mindedly moving closer to the sugar, which was in front of Miss Garney. "Just Dad, I mean. No wife or anything like that. But I've always looked forward to settling down and —"

"You'll make me spill my tea," said Miss Garney. "Now why don't you just have a piece of cake? We've got plenty of time for a nice — I mean I don't know exactly when they *will* be back, it might be any minute, but why don't we just chat?"

She patted her hair back into place, looking hunted. "It's been a most interesting trip," she said vivaciously. "Really, I had no idea space was so interesting. When Sir Vivian approached me, I mean, I had the idea that it would be just a long, dull thing, but actually it's been terribly interesting."

She made a grab for her bag. "Cigarette?" she asked in a bright tone, lighting one and holding it like a gun between her and Redfern.

Redfern sighed. "Thanks," he said, lighting one for himself. After all, a cigarette only burned

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for, he calculated, maybe nine minutes. He sat back and remarked conversationally: "So this was Sir Vivian's idea, coming here?"

"Oh, yes — his and Mr. Cowper's and Major Di Candia's. So we formed a syndicate. They had the know-how and the actual experience. Major Di Candia was in business on Iapetus for ever so long. And, well, I had the money." She dimpled charmingly. "Mummy's third husband was ever so wealthy, you see. So here we are."

Redfern stubbed out his cigarette and hitched his chair closer.

TWO HOURS LATER they heard a clamor outside. "Thank heaven!" said Miss Garney, putting down the carving knife.

She opened the lock. Cowper and Di Candia and the general scrambled in, dragging a chittering, protesting Fnit on a rope.

"Close the port!" bellowed Di Candia, and did it himself without waiting for anyone else to make a move. He leaned against it, breathing hard. "Well!" he said, staring at Miss Garney. "I thought *we* had a rough time, but *you* look like the tag end of a battle royal."

Redfern cleared his throat, but Miss Garney cut in. "Boys will be boys," she elucidated. "What happened? How did it work?"

"Oh, splendid, splendid!" said General Glick happily. "There's a complete change of plan, dear girl. The most fabulous bit of luck, really! We —"

"Save your maundering for a little later," snapped Cowper, tying the squirming Fnit to a hull brace. "Let's get out of here."

"Oh, right," said the general agreeably, and Di Candia snapped a salute and sat before the control board.

He kicked the ship off the ground, balancing it on its tail, drove it staggeringly off for one minute to what Redfern guessed to be north, then delicately set it down again. Di Candia had a radar screen to navigate by; the rest of those in the ship had nothing. But Redfern had the notion they'd gone not more than a mile from the previous landing site. It was a masterly job of piloting and Redfern looked at Di Candia with wonder in his eyes. But even so, the captive Fnit passed out cold.

Miss Garney made sympathetic noises and knelt beside the insectoid creature. "Leave him alone," Cowper ordered. "He's less trouble that way. Come in here a moment; I want to bring you up to date."

She nodded obediently and left Redfern with the general, the major and the Fnit. If he had

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had to choose among them for a companion, he thought morosely, it would have been a close decision, but he would have given it to the Fnit.

The general took the opportunity to gloat: "A masterly rearguard action, Mr. Redfern! Indeed, Rommel's *Afrika Korps* had nothing to teach us. A quick pounce and we secure our captive; a beautiful disengage and we're on our way to the ship, with the little roaches chasing after us and the schooner in sight, what? And once aboard the schooner and —"

Redfern said: "What the devil are you up to? Kidnaping? Don't you realize the State Department will have your hide for it?"

GENERAL Glick actually put one finger alongside his nose. "Perhaps there is more to it than meets the eye, Mr. Redfern."

"There better be," snarled Redfern. He was just beginning to get upset; things had moved too quickly for him to react as fast as they occurred. "You idiots think you can move in on a planet and throw your weight around without knowing a thing about what makes the inhabitants tick. Look at the Fnit! See the golden bands on his foreleg? That means it's royalty — *high* royalty! There are four bands on that one, and even the king, the one they call the Glow, only has five! Why, they'll rip you limb from limb if they catch you!"

The general chuckled ponderously. Redfern, disgusted had stamped over to the viewport and looked out. It was nearly dark. That was the only good thing, he told himself; the Fnits wouldn't come out at night even to rescue royalty. But after the darkness would follow the dawn; and when the dawn came . . .

He rubbed his neck unconsciously, feeling a sudden pain where the neck-clamps had been. If they were considerate enough merely to pillory and burn us, he thought.

But, he decided, it was not hopeless. The Fnits would undoubtedly be out for blood. But the humans were in the ship and the ship was in shape for flight. Nothing could stop them — if things got as rough as they surely would — from pushing their Fnit captive out of the lock and taking off for calmer worlds. He winced at the thought of abandoning his own ship, but maybe some day, when things cooled down, he could come back for it. Or, better, send someone for it. At any rate, they could surely get away with their lives, as long as they stayed in the ship.

Cowper and the girl came back from the private sections of the

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ship. "All right," Cowper said to Di Candia and General Glick. "We're set." And he put a hand to the baselock door.

"Hey!" yelped Redfern in dismay, as the other three men tramped out. "They'll tear you to pieces! Where the devil do you think you're going?"

Cowper looked at him coldly. "To the Fnit city, of course," he said, and closed the door behind him.

MISS GARNEY said waspishly, "Now, Redfern, none of those tricks again!"

"Don't worry!" he snapped. "I've got other things on my mind. Do you know what the Fnits will do to those men? Good Lord, woman, you can't get away with kidnaping! Even if we escape alive, we can't go home — we'd spend the rest of our lives in jail for molesting natives!"

"Oh, I think not," Miss Garney said lightly. "Mr. Redfern, you worry too much."

"But kidnaping —"

"Now, please," she said maternally, "we don't tell you how to run your business, so why should you tell us how to run ours? I don't deny that Sir Vivian had something like kidnaping in mind originally. But, as you say, it does have its illegal aspect and as things turned out, this is much better."

"Better how?"

Miss Garney hesitated, then looked conspiratorial. "Mr. Cowper would be furious, but — Well, you see, we may not have spent a year studying the Fnits as you did, but we did manage to make a few friends. And we discovered that the Glow was about to be married and Sir Vivian saw the possibilities in it at once. Why should we not, he said, get the Glow's bride aboard our ship? We could then negotiate with the Glow. We want trade privileges; he wants his wife. A simple exchange." She beamed. "Wasn't it clever of Sir Vivian?"

Redfern gasped: "You mean that this Fnit is —"

"Oh, no," she said reassuringly. "Not at all. It was the most wonderful bit of luck. Our Fnit contact gave us an excellent picture of the Glow's bride and of course, thanks to you, we knew where the harem was. So they all went in to get her and —" Miss Garney blushed prettily — "Mr. Cowper said they found her all right, and she was in the most *compromising* situation. With this one right here! Imagine, Mr. Redfern! Practically a queen, on the very eve of her marriage to the Glow, and she allows herself to have a common, vulgar —"

"Wait a minute," Redfern begged hoarsely. "What was the bit of luck?"

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"Why, you can see that, can't you, Mr. Redfern? Sir Vivian is going to see the Glow, to tell him that we broke up this affair and have the fellow here, for him to do with as he will; and surely the Fnit's gratitude will —"

Redfern had to swallow. He couldn't speak, but he made a violent gesture and Miss Garney stopped, staring at him. At last he got it out in a horrified voice: "Miss Garney, didn't your contact tell you that the Fnits have *three sexes?*"

IT TOOK HER a moment to get her breath. "You mean," she gasped, "they were all three of them going to — Why, the dirty little creatures! Good heavens, Mr. Redfern, if I had known it was going to be anything like this, I certainly would never have —"

"Shut up! Let me think!" He stared at the captive Fnit, now conscious again and staring unreadably back at him out of faceted eyes. Even the general's original half-witted plan wouldn't work now, he realized; they had a fine Fnit captive for trading purposes — but the Fnits had the general, the major and Mr. Cowper.

"We'll just have to bluff it out," he said at last. "The question is, do you want to come with me or stay here?"

"Come with you where?"

"Into the Fnit city. Your friends will be just about ready for a barbecue by now; if somebody doesn't get in there on the double, it'll be too late."

Miss Garney said hastily: "Oh, I'm coming with you! You certainly wouldn't dream of leaving me here with *that,* would you?"

Redfern felt wistful. Staying with a single Fnit seemed so close to Paradise in his eyes, compared with invading a hostile city full of them. But there wasn't any choice. They bound the captive more securely, Miss Garney found weapons for them, and they left.

It was all but dark, and distant Capella made reddish shadows all along the route to the city. At any rate, Redfern knew where the city was. It wouldn't be more than an hour's tramp to get there; in fact, they would pass almost beside his own rocket, where he had left it — so miserably long before! — in his ill-fated expedition that had wound up with him in the stocks, ready for burning.

Maybe, he thought, they would be able to stop off at his own ship. It wasn't a patch on the "syndicate's" ship — ancient rocket tube with auxiliaries, against the trim, compact Golightly drive that Miss Garney's money had bought; a single com-

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partment instead of the plush fittings of the bigger ship. But it was his own. And if he boarded it, there was nothing to stop him from taking off, possibly with Miss Garney, and leaving the idiotic male members of the syndicate to the fate they had richly earned — nothing, that is, but his conscience.

But he didn't have to argue with his conscience. The red-tinged shadows were scary but empty — all except one. And that one held a dozen armed, twittering Fnits; and they were all over Redfern and the girl in the twinkling of an eye; and when the "rescue party" reached the Fnit city, it was in a cocoon of chains.

THEY WERE sweating profusely by the time they got to the Chamber of the Glow — only partly because of the muggy damp warmth of the Fnit cities.

If Redfern and the girl were in a cocoon of chains, the major, the general and Mr. Cowper were entombed. They were in a row before a sort of balcony hanging from the rock wall and in the balcony was the Glow of All the Fnits. Looking at him, Redfern knew for the first time why he had that title. He actually glowed. There was a faint radiance all about him — radioactivity? More likely some chemical effect — bioluminescence, like the greenish light of a glowworm. Only this was pure white.

There was a Fnit translator below him, looking threateningly at the newcomers. "Why, Walter," exclaimed Miss Garney. "I didn't know you were connected with the —"

"Silence!" chittered the Fnit. "It is not possible for you to speak before the Glow!"

"Not possible? Why, Walter, after all the sugar I've given you!" Three Fnits advanced on her. She stopped scolding the translator and only shook her head ruefully. "These Fnits," she said disapprovingly.

The Glow began to speak, and the sound was like the magnified voice of crickets in a summer night. He paused and the interpreter Miss Garney had named Walter said:

"You are to die for abducting the para-wife of the Glow. Is it of interest to you what the manner of your death may be?"

"Oh, very much," piped up General Glick, wriggling in his chain-mail mummy shroud. "You aborigines are always terribly clever about that sort of thing, aren't you? Why, once we lost a subaltern to the Pathans and when they returned his body, it was —"

"Silence!" twittered the Fnit again. "Hear your death. It is fit

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that you should serve the One you abducted. Since she is a para-female, a receiver of eggs, you shall receive the grubs from her eggs, until they hatch."

Redfern, with horrid recollections of bloated beetles bearing the young of digger wasps on Earth, croaked: "Wait a minute! Let's talk business. You can't kill us; you'd never find the — the para-wife, or whatever you call her."

Colloquy between the translator and the Glow; the translator broke into English to say: "It is not so, we correct you. We know the para-female is in the great ship, and we know that you walked from the great ship to here, and thus it must be near. We have only to look for her."

"But it's night!" cried Redfern. "You know how we Earthmen are — we go about in the night and when it's cold and all the time. Why, our ships are as cold as the air outside at night; she'll freeze. It won't do you any good to find her if she freezes, will it?"

HIS COMMENT caused a frenzy of chirping. It disturbed the Glow; he rose on all eight legs and rasped horrendously at the captives. The translator said:

"You have spoken the truth. If the para-female is exposed to the night air, she will perish. Therefore we shall kill you immediately."

"Hold it!" Redfern yelled as the Glow twittered at the Fnit guards. "Don't you want to save her?"

"It is impossible," the translator explained. "You have said that she will freeze, and it will do us no good to find her when she is frozen. We cannot go out to rescue her, and if we could, she would not survive the trip back to the city." He made a motion with his mandibles, the Fnit equivalent of a philosophical shrug. "It would have been more useful to have you receive the grubs," he said regretfully, "but without the para-female, that is impossible, too, and so —" He beckoned meaningfully to the guards.

"But we can save her!"

The interpreter asked curiously, "How?"

"We can heat our ship if we wish, you know. Just allow us to go back to the ship and we'll warm it up. In the morning, you can come and get her."

The translator made the equivalent of a nod. "Very interesting," he said. "No."

"But why?" Redfern demanded.

"The Glow in his wisdom sees that you will escape. It is better that the para-female should die than that you should escape. There are other para-females."

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"We promise we won't escape," Redfern said desperately. "We—"

He stopped short, mouth open.

"Well?" asked the Fnit after a moment.

Redfern swallowed. "May I — may I talk to the Glow for a moment? Alone?"

"It is not possible," said the translator. "The Glow does not speak English, you see, so that if you —"

"I mean alone except for you. Without the other humans."

Miss Garney warned: "Mr. Redfern, I certainly hope you aren't trying to sell us out."

Redfern didn't have to answer that, because the Glow rose majestically on all of his legs and twittered in a commanding tone. The Fnit guards picked up Miss Garney and the men and bore them, chains clanking, outside.

The translator said: "You may speak."

IT HAD BEEN a lie, of course; the ship's heaters kept it well above the temperature of the ambient air. But Redfern was shivering by the time he got there and he turned them up a notch.

The Fnit para-female chittered furiously at him. He said: "Don't worry about a thing. The old man will be here in the morning."

He shucked the parka and gloves and stared moodily at the control board. Nothing could stop him from kicking the Fnit out the baselock, warming up the Golightly drive and lifting gently off the surface of Capella XII in a gentle cat's-cradle of magnetic force lines. Less than three weeks and he'd be home . . .

He sighed and contemplated without much confidence the gullibility of the Fnits. If only Miss Garney, ethereal and adorable Miss Garney, were here with him! But the Glow had refused to let anyone else come along to

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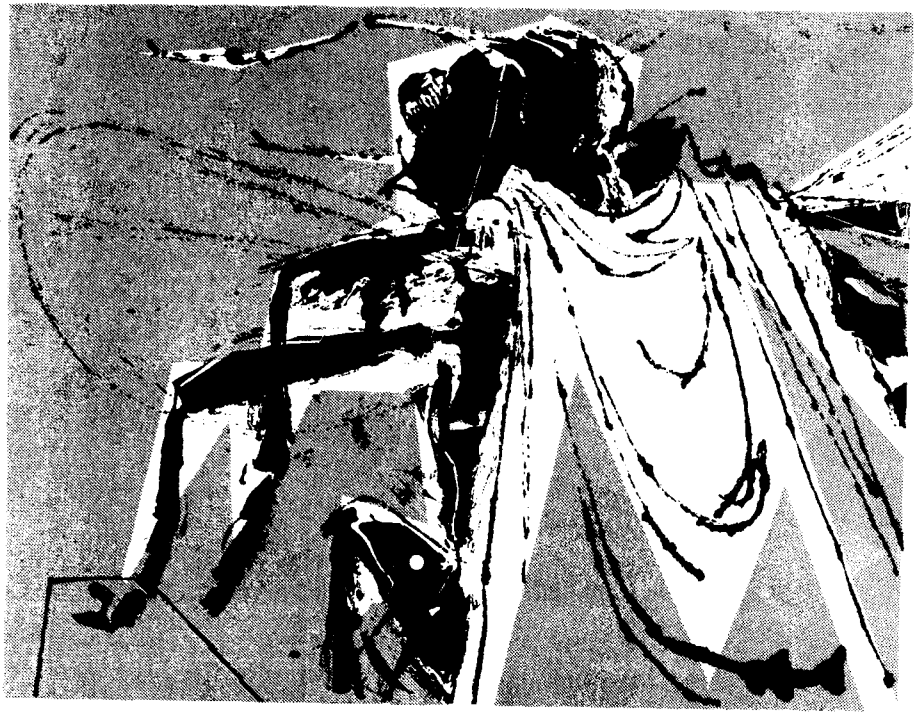

"rescue" the Fnit para-female; he wanted the others as hostages.

Redfern stretched out on the padded navigator's couch. He was so keyed up, he realized dismally, that it would be impossible for him to get to sleep; he would no doubt spend the whole long Capellan night worrying and brooding and . . .

He woke up with the clatter of insectoid feet in the baselock scratching at his eardrums. A Fnit face peered curiously into the ship, disappeared, and was replaced by the whitely gleaming face of the Glow himself. The Glow sprang to the side of his para-bride, and there was a mad chittering and clattering of fondly caressing arthropod limbs as the lovers were reunited.

Redfern breathed again. Behind the Glow were other Fnits, and with them were the general, the major, Mr. Cowper — and last, and emphatically complaining, Miss Garney. The Fnit Glow

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had kept his word. Redfern began to feel slightly happier as he stood up and rustily began to walk toward the newcomers.

"— know that I am absolutely *no* good in the morning without my tea," Miss Garney was telling everyone within earshot. "And still they drag me, utterly *drag* me, here, without even a decent word!" She caught sight of Redfern and her tone from hot rage became ice. "Ah! Your little scheme didn't work, eh? Couldn't manipulate the Golightly controls, is that it? So you were not able to make your escape at our expense after all, were you?"

REDFERN had incredulously opened his mouth to answer and then remembered the Fnits. He turned to the translator. "Everything all right?"

The translator said: "It so appears. You are sure you do not wish to change your mind? There will be many grubs and this parafemale is small . . ."

"Thanks, no. Let's get on with it."

The translator said philosophically: "Then let it be as you request. Come, the Glow will accompany us to watch the spectacle of your burning."

"Burning?" cried Miss Garney. "But I thought — they've got the Fnit back — I mean —"

"Burning," said the translator. "Let us go to the pyre."

Redfern led the way, well out of range of Miss Garney's complaining voice. Beside him, the translator twittered unendingly, but Redfern was hardly listening. They came to the cleft in the hills where his own old rocket was nestled on its tail-pads and he scrambled aboard, the translator following awkwardly.

It was like being home again. He touched the walls and battered control panel lovingly. He ran his fingers over the jet keys and patted the familiar navigational books in the lock-shelf over the controls. There was the gray cover of *Hypertrails,* giving course settings for every star; the *Rocket Engineer's Handbook;* the *Digest of Interstellar Law; Higgins' Astronauts' Companion.*

He took down the gold-embossed volume of Higgins sentimentally and let it fall open. There were the remembered pin-ups, just as he had last seen them — full-color stereoscopic views of the most delectable beauties of the Solar System. How wise of the Astrogational Board to make Higgins required equipment for solitary navigators! And yet how these great beauties palled into insignificance, Redfern thought fondly, compared with the flesh-and-blood loveliness of —

He swallowed and took a closer

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look at the pinups, just as the rest of the party came panting and arguing into the airlock. He glanced up at Miss Garney and unbelievingly again at the pinups.

Something was wrong somewhere, he thought in horror. It didn't occur to Redfern that he had been fifteen months in space and that even the Wicked Witch of the North would have looked attractive to his woman-starved eyes. He had forgotten how much more attractive the soft, supple flesh of youth might be than the set, determined lines of Miss Garney's face.

All he knew was that here were the pinups, and here was Miss Garney, and somehow he had made a terrible mistake.

THE TRANSLATOR was chittering: "It is complete. You will now combust yourselves according to our pact."

Redfern ignored the yelps from the rest of the human party. "All right, let's get at it."

"One moment," chirped the Fnit. "The Glow has asked that I remind you of your undertakings. Firstly, you have stated that it would be inconvenient to you to die as we proposed — that is, with the grubs of the Glow's female in your flesh."

"Very inconvenient," Redfern agreed.

"And secondly, that you undertake to burn yourselves to death, complete with this structure in which we are presently talking."

"Right," said Redfern.

"It is strange to the Glow that this metal should burn. He does not doubt your word, but he must protect himself. You have promised to go up in flame for him, and if you do not do so, there will be steps taken."

"Oh, we'll go up in flame, all right," promised Redfern.

"But," insisted the translator, "if you do not, then, thirdly, the Glow reminds you that there are twenty-six other humans on the planet. If you should cheat our justice, it is they who will receive the grubs in your place. All of them. Now you may proceed." And the Fnit clambered backward out of the lock.

Redfern slammed the lock and dogged it. General Glick protested: "See here, this ship won't burn, sir! If you think we will be a party to —"

"Drop dead," said Redfern moodily. "But strap yourselves in first." He didn't even look over his shoulder to see if they had done so. Let them get banged around a bit, he thought savagely, and put his fingers on the main-drive rocket controls.

There was a cough and a roar and a rumbling scream, and every movable object in the cabin shook and slid about as

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they drove up from the surface of Capella XII.

Forty minutes later, they were orbiting around the planet and Redfern began coaxing his ancient auxiliaries to ease them into hyperspace for the long trip home.

The four others in the cramped cabin rubbed their bruises and screamed at him, singly and in chorus. Redfern gave them the silence of his back.

GENERAL Glick's bass roar, rumbling under the voices of the others, was raging: "— most disgraceful conduct I have ever observed in my life, sir! Didn't you hear what the Fnit said? Our fellow human beings! Betrayed! Left to perish most foully! What will they say at the Club? For make no mistake, sir, this will be found out. Massacred, every human being on Capella XII, to save your craven skin! And then we flee like cowardly babes in this rattletrap, when our own ship is thrice as big and faster and —"

"Don't even talk to him, Sir Vivian," Miss Garney advised coldly. "He isn't worth it."

"Eh," said the general after a pause. "I suppose you're right. But just to think," he went on morosely, from his hammock, "that *my* name, the name of General Sir Vivian Mowgli-Glick, should be linked with a pusillanimous, chicken-hearted, black deed like that!"

Mr. Cowper said: "Newborns, General. What can you expect?"

"I suppose that's it," the general agreed moodily. "Takes time to develop a real code, what? Let him live a half dozen lives or so, like you and me and Miss —"

"General!" cried the girl.

"Oh, sorry," mumbled the general. They went on like that and Redfern, doggedly busy with his auxiliaries, smiled coldly to himself. So she was as ancient as the general, was she? Thank heaven, he told himself virtuously, that he had known from the first she wasn't worth pursuing. The impudent nerve of these zombies! Taking up space that later generations deserved to have — and blaspheming him for saving the lives they had no right to!

There was a *clunk* and the wavering lines of force came into phase. The stars winked out in the viewplate and they were in featureless hyperspace.

Redfern sighed, and set course, and turned to face his guests.

"We're on our way," he told them. "Now do you want to listen to what I have to say?"

"No!" said the general, the major and Mr. Cowper. What Miss Garney said was: "Beast!"

"Suit yourself," Redfern told

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them. "But you're on my ship and I'll thank you to mind your manners."

"On your ship, are we?" shrieked Miss Garney. "And whose fault is that, I'd like to know? Why couldn't we have taken our own ship — I mean assuming we were going to leave the other Earthmen to that horrible death?"

Redfern said, with the last bit of his patience: "We couldn't take your ship because I didn't want to leave the others to a horrible death."

AT LEAST he had their interest. They glared at him and Major Di Candia said: "Do you suppose the fellow means anything by that?"

"Of course not!" said Miss Garney. "It's only a cheap lie to make us forgive him — not that we ever will."

"Ah, why do I waste my time talking to you?" Redfern asked disgustedly. "Look, what kind of drive did your ship have?"

"Full Golightly," Miss Garney said proudly. "Magnetic warp throughout, even for planetside landings. It cost nearly —"

"Never mind what it cost." Redfern rapped the hull of his own ship. "This one's a rocket. Now do you see the difference?"

"Certainly I see the difference," snapped Miss Garney. "It will take us twice as long to get home — to say nothing of the fact that the five of us will be huddled in this little rathole of a cabin the whole way!"

"No," said Redfern. "The difference is that yours was *not* a rocket. I arranged with the Glow for us to incinerate ourselves, as you perhaps heard the Fnit translator say. It was the only thing we could do; would you have preferred to take the place of the Fnit para-female you so cleverly kidnaped —" They didn't even have the grace to blush, he saw unbelievingly — "and have baby Fnits hatching in your bodies? Maybe you would, but I wouldn't."

"But the Earthmen, sir!" snapped Sir Vivian. "You've betrayed them!"

Redfern sighed. "I promised the Glow he could watch us go up in flame. And what did he see?"

"Why — he saw us escaping."

"No!" said Redfern. "He saw the wash of flame from our rockets. He's just a Fnit, remember, and they've never seen a rocket land — mine is the only one on the whole planet and I landed at night, when the Fnits are tucked away. So he saw us go up in flame — literally! We're burned up — as far as they know. The Glow is satisfied. The humans are safe. We're on our way

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home. And now —" he added — "if you will kindly form a single line and pucker up, ladies first, I shall extend my left foot."

They might not be bright, he thought to himself admiringly, but they certainly were good and stubborn. It was nearly an hour before they all got it straight that the remaining Earthmen on Capella XII would *not* be massacred, and they themselves were safe enough, and somebody could even go back and pick up their ship, sooner or later, so that all they had lost was their time. And then each one of them manfully apologized.

"GOOD show, really," burbled the general, the last to get the thing straight in his mind. He dragged his hammock closer to Redfern's. "Brilliant," he went on, tying the rope-end into position for a nice, comfortable chat. "Made it look like a blasted suttee, what? I've not seen the like of it since the old days in India. Reminds me of a time in Hyderabad — '86, it must have been."

"Excuse me," Redfern interrupted. "Got to check the auxiliaries." It looked as if it was going to be a long voyage, he thought drearily, staring at the perfectly automatic controls of the auxiliaries and wishing his father had got enough money from the bank for a larger ship.

"Mr. Redfern?"

He turned with a start. The voice was meltingly sweet; Miss Garney was smiling dewily.

"Dear boy," she said, "I — I just wanted to say that you were perfectly *splendid*. I do hope you'll forgive us for the terrible way we acted. And," she added archly, "I certainly hope you won't pay too much attention to — well, what Sir Vivian said. You know, about — uh — age."

"Of course not," Redfern said glassily, watching her as a bird might watch a python.

She reached daintily across him to pick up the volume of Higgins. She glanced at it, tittered, and looked coyly at Redfern.

"Naughty," she reproved and, before he could stop her, dropped the book of pinups into the disposal chute. "You won't need these, dear boy. We'll be together for a good long time, won't we? And, really, don't you think that it never hurts if a woman is just the *teentsiest* bit older? Especially for a man as *experienced* as you?"

Fifty-six days, he calculated, staring at the chugging auxiliaries. Fifty-six days with the general, the major, Mr. Cowper . . . and Miss Garney.

It was going to be a *very* long voyage.

— CHARLES SATTERFIELD

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